

THE VANISHING ISLAND

Innishios, an island off the Irish coast, is said by legend to be sinking gradually into the sea, and the freak storm that isolates the island lends colour to the disturbing prophecy of old Polly Cavanagh, who is credited with the gift of second sight, and heightens the superstitious fears of the islanders.

The author builds up his atmosphere so deftly that we not only share the forebodings of the little group of people on beleaguered Innishios, but accept unquestionably everything that happens to them and it.

His characters are real people, who grow in stature with the storm, clinging together for comfort, but facing the unknown with a sturdy faith and a sure hierarchy of values. This is a fine story, marked by good construction, good timing, and good writing, and the tension mounts to the very end.

THE VANISHING ISLAND

by

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To my sister

PEGGY

The Vanishing Island



CHAPTER ONE

THEY say that Innishios sinks a little deeper into the sea every year. Several explanations are proffered to account for this phenomenon but the legendary one is perhaps as convincing as the scientific. The old people see in the vanishing island an hour-glass that measures the life of the world. When the sea finally claims it, they say, eternity will claim us all and the world will be no more. In spite of this dire prophecy the ten people who lived on the island seemed content enough and rarely bothered to check the high-water line to see how much nearer they were to the day of doom.

From my vantage point the island rarely appears the same. Seated at the desk of my study I can see right across the two-mile Sound that separates the island from the mainland, and without having to shift my head, Innishios is always framed in the centre of the window.

At low water its bulk is really impressive, a wedge of land darkly outlined against the sea, but when the tide is full it looks like green flotsam floating on the waves. In the evening, when the sun sinks low behind it, the land is lost in a dazzling aura of light, and seems, in fact, to have really vanished.

The island is inclined from north to south over its mile-long length. On the north shore you look down from a forty-foot cliff, and on the other end the land shelves so gradually into the sea that one could wade a hundred yards from the shore and still find the water barely knee-deep. The few houses of the only village are built along the eastern shore facing the mainland. From my window they look like sheets drying on a sagging clothes line.

Only one house is built on the high part of the island: a grey, two-storied building, standing starkly on a slight dome of land almost on the cliff edge and rearing a stiff windowless back to the northern winds. The place was my father's, and is now mine, and it was here that David Cartwright came to write his famous book. I met him on the first day he arrived, and even then, when I had no way of foreseeing how fateful his arrival was to be for our little community, I considered our meeting a momentous one. I was buying stamps in the post office when he leaned a shoulder against the door and looked in. . . . He was a youngish man, bareheaded, and carried his jacket slung over one shoulder. He had a few days' stubble on his lean jaws and his hair was a bit windblown, nevertheless he made a singularly striking picture framed against the sunshine outside. The strong column of his neck rose from an open-necked shirt, and a signet ring glittered on the third finger of his right hand. He took in the entire post office in a quiet easy scrutiny, from Miss O'Dea's pinched face looking askance behind the bars of her cage to the assorted boots, pots, lamps and brushes that hung from the ceiling. Finally his gaze rested on me.

"Could you let me have a little information, please?" His voice was deep and his accent undefinable. I had met many men who had travelled widely and who spoke as he did. Neither by word or intonation could they be associated with any country. They were citizens of the world. "I am anxious to contact Mr. O'Riain." His eyes wandered from me to the postmistress, including her in the question.

"I'm O'Riain," I told him, "and I suppose you are Mr. Cartwright?"

"Yes," he said simply, extending his hand. The coincidence of our meeting did not seem to surprise him. "I'm glad I was expected." His palm was dry and his grip firm.

"The house is ready for you," I said, "but perhaps you may want to stay on the mainland until to-morrow. I could easily put you up. We could go over first thing to-morrow morning."

He eased his shoulder from the door jamb. "If it's all the same to you, Mr. O'Riain, I'd like to get over there right away."

I went out with him into the sunlight. "As you wish, I'll take you over. But perhaps a meal or maybe a drink——?"

"No, thanks all the same." He swung his jacket from his shoulder. "I had a meal a few hours ago. I'm rather anxious to get started." He jerked his head towards the little pier. "I drove here in a taxi from Dunfooy station. The driver put my luggage down there. I thought it the logical place."

I could not understand his hurry, but I didn't question him.

"Well, if you are determined to go, we can cross over right away. The boat is just here."

There was not much luggage, considering I had rented him the house for a year; two large suitcases, a smaller one, and a portable typewriter. A light mackintosh was thrown over them.

He helped me place the luggage in the boat, and sat in the bows with the easy confidence of one accustomed to small craft. He kept his eyes on the island as I started the outboard engine and drew away from the pier.

"Not a bad hunk of land out there," he remarked. "Rather low-lying, particularly to the south."

"It is," I agreed, "but it's not as low as it looks from here."

"All the same, I bet the southern half is nearly awash in a south-wester."

"Pretty near," I told him. "The land is no good for five hundred yards inshore on the south side, and the rest is only poor grazing. The people are dry enough on the eastern side, though. It's sheltered there."

"Nice-looking place," he said after a while. "I like it already. I suppose it's difficult to communicate with the mainland in bad weather."

We were well clear of the short promontory now and the wind was beginning to catch us. I had to shout to be heard.

"They've been cut off once or twice but never long enough to create a serious situation. It would have to be really bad to prevent the boats getting in. We simply run them ashore on the southern side."

He nodded his head, and made some remark that I was unable to catch, and we did not speak again until I nosed the boat against the concrete pier fronting the village. He stepped ashore and tied the painter for me and lifted out the luggage I passed to him.

"You needn't bother to come ashore," he said to me then. "I've inconvenienced you enough. Anybody will show me the way to the house."

His anxiety to be rid of me nettled me somewhat. "As your prospective landlord I have certain responsibilities towards you. Besides, we must tell your housekeeper of your arrival. If you don't mind, I prefer to see you settled

in myself. I'd be easier in my mind. After all, renting a place by correspondence is rather like buying a pig in a bag."

He shrugged. "As you wish, but it's not necessary. I don't want to cause any excitement or confusion."

"You won't," I told him, as I scrambled on to the pier.

In this, of course, as I well knew, I was wrong. Already a knot of people had approached the pier and were looking at us with the guileless curiosity of an island people whose sole highway is the sea. I knew all of them: Dan O'Leary with his two sons Jackeen and Oweneen; Frankie Casey and his wife Molly and their three small daughters; Polly Cavanagh, bowed down with the weight of over eighty years; and, I was happy to note, Katie Farrington, who had elected to cook and housekeep for our new tenant. I introduced her to Mr. Cartwright.

Katie had buried two husbands, but looked none the worse for it. She was young-looking for her forty-odd years, and her raven hair was as black as when she was a little girl. She offered a shy hand to Cartwright, but she spoke to me.

"I lit all the fires yesterday to air the place, and the range is going since this morning. There's no food in the house, though. To-morrow I had in mind for Mr. Cartwright's coming."

"There's no need to bother now," said Cartwright, obviously embarrassed by the attention of the islanders. "I won't need anything to eat until to-morrow."

"Glory be to God, boy," said the shocked Katie, "d'ye want to die on our hands. You must have something against the night, and there's your breakfast to be thinking of to-morrow morning. 'Tis no trouble at all to bring the food up to the house. It's all ready, except the eggs—I want them to be fresh for you."

Katie had been reared in the tradition that a man's sole interest is food, and perhaps something in her outraged

expression dissuaded Cartwright from giving her an argument in this instance. He shrugged his shoulders and stooped for his luggage. Here he was forestalled by Dan O'Leary. The big lobster man interposed himself between the baggage and the outstretched hand and removed his short pipe from his mouth long enough to say :

"Leave the bags be, Mr. Cartwright. Me two sons Jackeen and Oweneen are big and ugly enough to help you with the baggage." He caught my eye and ran the stem of his pipe through his moustache. "You don't be worryin' about him at all, Cathal. Divil a bit of harm will come to him with all of us watching him."

Before Cartwright realized what had happened, Dan's two sons, who were not very big and certainly not ugly, had possessed themselves of his luggage and were heading for the road. The newcomer looked at me, a protest in his eyes. He opened his mouth and shut it again. The swear-word he used was barely audible to me.

"I'll see you settled in," I told him, taking him by the elbow. "We made the house as comfortable as we could."

"I'm sure you have," he said politely.

"Are you goin' up with him?" quizzed Dan O'Leary, and when I nodded: "Sure there's no need, if there's hurry on you, I could—"

"I'm in no hurry," I interrupted him a little warmly. There seemed to be a conspiracy to get rid of me.

"I'll step up the road a-piece with you then," said Dan, unperturbed.

Just then Polly Cavanagh came towards us, pushing her way through the group with the prerogative of venerable years. Time had turned her skin to wrinkled parchment and her eyes were red-rimmed from turf smoke, yet there was always a certain nobility about her that was almost regal. Her black shawl was fastened at her neck with a big cameo brooch. She rested her hands on the arm of my tenant.

"You're coming as a stranger but you'll prove a true friend," she said. "'Tis often I've seen you in my dreams. The very same—" She drew in her breath sharply when she saw his ring. "'Tis the very same—a bright band of gold. Just as I saw you. There will be confusion of the waves and the winds and great excitement, but you won't be the cause of it. You're welcome among us, my son, and God will bless your work."

Strangely enough, although the old woman's words must have been as unintelligible to him as they were to us, he showed neither surprise nor resentment. As we moved away he thanked her for her welcome.

The house he had rented from me was a half a mile from the village and on the highest part of the island. I had lived there several years after my father's death, but I never liked it. It was dry enough, though it stood in the teeth of the winds, but I always felt lonely there. I had some misgivings now about installing this young man in the grey bulk of it. However he seemed genuinely pleased with what he saw when we ushered him inside. The kitchen stove was lighting and the fire in the living-room was slacked down with turf mould. Upstairs the bedroom was bright with sunlight from the open window. He was intrigued by the view. From here the rugged mainland seemed close enough to throw a stone at it, and the sea creaming among the rocks made an undulating line of white at the base of the cliffs.

"It's better than I had hoped for," he said. "Indeed, it is as near perfect as it can be."

"You're seeing it at its best," I had to tell him. "To-day is a pet day. The weather can get really bad out here. When the wind blows from the north you'll swear the house is full of banshees."

"That won't bother me. I have my work to do." Although I was curious, I did not ask him the nature of his work, but the portable typewriter had given me a clue.

Through the window I saw Katie Farrington arriving with a full basket.

"You're in safe hands anyway with Katie Farrington around," I said.

Before we left him to Katie I told him that if ever he needed either me or the boat he could tell Dan O'Leary.

"I may take you up on the boat idea," he said, "but I don't think I'll need anything else." He smiled suddenly, and it made an agreeable change. For the first time I warmed towards him. "If you feel inclined to worry about me, please don't. I assure you I can take care of myself." He shook hands warmly and went indoors.

Dan O'Leary and his two sons and myself went down to the pier together.

Though Dan puffed solidly at his pipe I knew he was itching with curiosity.

"Strange kind of a fellow entirely," he said. "Sounds like one of the gentry long ago. Isn't it funny now he comin' out here to live in your house? I suppose 'tis a bit of fishin' he'll have in mind, or maybe this bird watchin'? He'll be like that gomoge of an Englishman who was here last year."

"I think this man is English, too," I said.

Dan removed his pipe to spit on the road. "You don't say! Then I'm sure 'tis the bird watchin' he'll be at. A great people for bird watchin', the English. They're a funny race altogether."

He came with me as far as the pier.

"D'ye mind what old Polly said about him," he said, as I got into the boat.

"I wouldn't take too much notice of what she says, Dan. She's getting very old now."

"All the same there's somethin' in it. I've known Polly man and boy, and she have the gift of second sight like her mother before her."

“ In any case there wasn't much to what she said about him.”

Dan combed his moustache with the stem of his pipe. “ ‘ Confusion of the waves and the winds,’ she said, ‘ and great excitement.’ We'll keep a weather eye on that lad. If he's important enough to get into Polly's dream he must be a real remarkable man. A man worth watchin' however.”

I couldn't get Dan's last sentence out of my mind as I steered the boat across the Sound.

CHAPTER TWO

I DID not see Cartwright for a week after, and during that time he never came to the mainland, although Dan O'Leary and his sons could have put him ashore every day. It was from Dan that I learned how my young tenant was faring. Apparently he was well on the way to becoming a recluse. He had not come down to the village since he went to the island, and on the few occasions that Dan had gone to him the younger man made no secret of the fact that entertaining guests was not to his liking.

"If you ask me," said Dan, when I met him towards the end of the week, "I'd say that boy is slightly touched in the head. Katie tells me that 'tis little enough he eats. He keeps poundin' away on that machine of his as if his life depended on it. Sometimes, she says, he don't even know she's there. No matter how early she comes in the morning he's up and working before her, surrounded by more crumpled paper than you'd see in a month's walk. When she starts cleaning the place up she has to stick the brush between his legs and under his chair—but do he give a sign that he knows she's there? Divil a bit! One time she touched some papers he had on his table—you know how Katie is about tidyin' up—Well, man alive, he nearly went through the roof! He warned her about doin' it again and told her in the name of all the saints—and

that's puttin' it mildly, savin' your presence and not to offend your ears—not to be fussin' around." Dan spat on the pier and brushed his sleeve over his moustache. "He's got Katie so that she don't know if she's comin' or goin'. She says her nerves are all of a jitter, and you know what she is when her nerves get that way. One of these fine days our friend is going to have a saucepan smashed over his head. I'll say this much for Katie, she knows how to handle men."

I found this vaguely disturbing. Katie Farrington's temper, though difficult to rouse, was formidable.

"Worst of it is," continued Dan, "she cooks all sorts of dainty stuff for him and she says a bird would pick what he eats. That's not what hurts Katie, though; divil a word he says about her food or her cookin'; he just picks at it while he reads a book stuck up agin the jug. Katie says that if she gave him a plate of seaweed he'd be none the wiser. I tell you, Cathal, Katie is crackin' up. She's not used to such treatment. You know about her two husbands—she might have trained them well and maybe talked them to death, but they certainly didn't die of undernourishment. 'The two of them made fine corpses.'"

He stepped into the boat where Jackeen and Oweneen were waiting for him among the lobster pots. "If I were you I'd have a word with our friend before Katie splits him."

I did nothing about Cartwright that day, but the following morning I steered over to the island and went on up to his house. His housekeeper was not there, but I found my tenant in the kitchen typing at the table. Crumpled paper formed a ring around his chair like big white flower petals, and the table itself was littered with books and typescript. He did not hear me come in so I knocked loudly on the door. He looked up at once, and his exasperated expression softened somewhat when he saw me. He pulled a hand hard over his face and moved his head from side to side as though to relax tensed muscles.

"God bless the work," I gave him.

"Very little to bless," he returned. "There's very little done." He made a vague gesture towards the paper on the floor, all abortive efforts at thought translation.

I sat down uninvited and began to fill my pipe.

"Maybe you're trying too hard. Sometimes it's just a case of not seeing the wood for the trees." He looked at me sharply, but I continued to pack my pipe. "I didn't tell you before, but I write a little myself, and I understand how you feel."

"I know your work," he said, suddenly. "I think I've read everything you've written."

I was genuinely surprised and, not unnaturally, gratified. "Well, that makes us kin, if you like. I don't know what you are working on. If it's a novel——"

"It's not," he said briefly.

"Then I may not be able to help you so much, then. But perhaps my experience with creative work might be of some assistance. I've often worked on a very promising story, writing like fury under the impetus of kindly inspiration, then suddenly—puff!—the story goes dead, the characters hang in mid-air, as it were, listless and unconvincing, and you spend despairing hours staring at a blank page." He did not say anything as I lighted my pipe, but kept turning a long pencil over and over in his lean fingers.

"My own cure for literary dryness," I continued, "is a holiday; fishing, walking, hunting, shooting—anything except writing. Inspiration is a capricious old lady and she keeps her bag shut up tightly as long as she feels you want it, but once you lose interest in her she opens it again. It's only a question of waiting."

He stared at me thoughtfully for a moment, and I noticed that the stubble he had when he arrived was developing into a light beard.

"You may be right," he said, at length. "But you see I know exactly what I want to say." He tapped his temple

with his finger. "It's all up here—crystal clear. So clear, indeed, that sometimes I feel I could set it down on paper in a single day. Yet immediately I put a sheet in that machine something funny happens. Words get in the way—the whole fabric of what I want to say gets messed up with mere words." He shook his head. "It's hard to explain, and you may not know what I mean."

"I think I do," I told him. "You see your idea as a whole, a complete entity, and you are impatient because you can't pen a thought as easily as you can think it. It takes time and method to break an idea up into words, and it is difficult to see what you are building through the scaffolding of the mere mechanics of writing. Does that sound like your trouble?"

"Something like that," he admitted.

I came to my feet. "I believe you're rushing at this thing—whatever it is you are writing. Break your idea up into sections and tackle each painstakingly until the whole structure is complete. No matter how clearly you see it you see it only as an architect sees a building in his mind's eye. But you must lay stone upon stone, or word on word if you like, and that takes time. I suggest you take a holiday. Your idea will germinate in the meantime." I paused at the door. "You're still a young man, you can afford to wait."

He had listened to me with his eyes averted, and even when he spoke he did not look at me. "I can afford to wait, I agree, but I have a strange feeling about this work of mine. I am unable to explain that either. It seems that I can't repress an urge to finish this as quickly as I can." He looked at me suddenly. "Youth is no guarantee of longevity."

I felt suddenly uneasy as I met his grey eyes. "Have you any reason to suspect you won't live as long as anybody else?"

"No," he said slowly. "A few years ago my expectancy

of life was nil. I saw men die on all sides of me, and most of them were just boys." He looked away from me again out through the window that gave over the grey sea. "This premonition I have, has, I feel, nothing to do with death. But whatever the reason, the sense of urgency remains with me." He smiled suddenly. "But maybe I will take it a little easier, and believe me I am grateful for your advice."

"Good," I said, "then you can come fishing with me this evening. The mackerel are breaking north of the point over."

He hesitated a moment, looked uncertainly at the typewriter, and then threw his pencil on the table.

"All right," he said. "Maybe a day out will clear the fog a little bit."

"You can be sure of it," I told him.

And so that evening we went fishing.

The manner and regularity of the mackerel break off the promontory every year is to me one of the wonders of the world. Around the second week of August the tiny fry muster in millions off the northern arm of the bay, herded from over hundreds of square miles of sea by the blue-grey mackerel. The tiny fish clutter so thickly that they turn the sea to silver, fluttering pathetically, despatching divisions and contingents in aimless manoeuvres, like a panic-stricken army.

When the first attack begins, the sea literally boils and the steel-blue torpedoes dart among their helpless victims, jaws gaping, cramming the fry down their gullets by sheer momentum. The battle might well last for days or weeks, each attack punctuated by an uneasy interlude in which the unfortunate victims move blindly from place to place.

I delight in killing mackerel. I feel that I am championing the weak and defenceless. Every fish on my hook

is one less to prey on the smaller brothers. Perhaps it is an acute sense of justice makes me feel like that, seeing that the mackerel is so big and strong and the fry so tiny. So I kill as many as I can.

Like all bullies, the mackerel is not clever. He is so gluttonous that he rarely takes time out to see exactly what he is rushing at. His avarice transforms even the most makeshift bait into an edible morsel, a piece of tinsel wrapped on a hook is an infallible lure, or a lifeless sprat impaled on a hook, but the deadliest of all is the simple spinner, a piece of shaped metal, painted red on one side, that rotates as it is moved through the water. This they cannot resist, and they become aware of the three barbed hooks at the end only when it is too late.

The evening I went fishing with David Cartwright I was trolling with no less than six of these spinners. They trailed behind the boat at strategic lengths. By the time we had reached the point, I had so perverted the mind of the young man against mackerel in general that he was ready to slay them with his own hands, and kept looking eagerly towards the turbulent water which marked the scene of battle. A desperate struggle was going on when we reached the point. I stopped the engine to view the situation. All about us tiny silver pencils were fleeing for their lives, but the maelstrom was located about a hundred yards out off the point. I headed for that, shipping the engine and putting out the oars and leaving Cartwright to tend the lines. Silently we descended on the scene of battle, and there in the evening sunshine we wrought havoc in the ranks of the marauders.

Our strategy was deadly. Occasionally we made a sweep out to sea beyond the fringe of the break only to troll into the heart of the *mêlée* again. By sunset we were but one boat of a score, and the mackerel were moving away from the coast. Nevertheless our deadly work went on until the lighted lamps of the cabins winked at us from the

mainland. Finally, as dusk deepened around us, we tired of the slaughter, and by that time the bottom of the boat was covered with fish.

Cartwright and I viewed each other over the carnage. The whole personality of my tenant had changed. His hair was tousled, and fish scales glistened on his sweater and trousers. He looked extremely young. I do not believe we had consciously exchanged a single word since we reached the break, but I was aware of a comradeship with this man which was difficult to explain. We stared at each other with a strange solemnity, the fish between us, and the broad sweep of the darkening sea on all sides; then suddenly we burst out laughing. It gave me an odd pleasure to see that serious face relax in laughter.

"Glad you came fishing?" I asked him.

He brushed the sleeve of his sweater over his eyes. "I haven't enjoyed myself so much in years." He touched the fish with his toe.

"What are we going to do with these?"

"Bring them back to the island. Old Polly enjoys a fresh mackerel."

"But we've enough for an army."

"Dan O'Leary and his sons will account for some, and so will Frankie Casey and his clan, to say nothing of Katie. Then Miss O'Dea back in the post office will take some, and there's Father Daly and his curate, and maybe the Rev. Mr. Johnson at Dunfoy." I looked at him speculatively. "Maybe you might be trying one yourself!"

"They're a bit oily," he said doubtfully.

"Katie Farrington has a way with them."

"I might take one of them so when we get back."

I turned the engine overboard and started it. The island was a vague shadow in the universal greyness about a mile away to the south, and on the other side of the Sound the lights of the mainland looked out at us like far-off stars. It was only when I put about and opened the throttle that

I noticed the weather had worsened somewhat. A stiff southerly breeze was beginning to ruffle up the sea, spilling it over on us in a fine spray. Cartwright slithered over the fish to where I stood at the tiller.

"Drier back here."

I gave him an oilskin coat and he slung it cloak-fashion over his shoulders.

"We came further north than I thought," he remarked.

"The excitement of the fray," I told him, and he laughed.

"We certainly smote them hip and thigh."

The darkness descended on us as we entered the Sound, and the sea was beginning to pile up on all sides. A swinging light off the starboard bow marked the island pier, and I steered for that. Ten minutes later Dan O'Leary, bearing a lantern, tied up our painter and we stamped ashore.

"I'm thinkin' 'tis going to blow to-night," he said. "The bottom is fallin' out o' the glass. 'Tis fine of ye to bring me the mackerel. I couldn't go out myself, and wouldn't in any case, seein' that ye were at it." He dropped into the tossing boat and began to help himself.

"Don't forget the others," I reminded him as he began to toss the fish on to the pier.

He did not look up. "They'll be down themselves, you'll see."

Sure enough, as he spoke, Frankie Casey appeared out of the darkness. The coldest day in winter Frankie would only wear a waistcoat.

"I was watchin' you through the glass and you at the slaughter."

"There's some there for you if Dan has left you any."

"What would I be doin' with them?" said Dan. "There's plenty for all, and we'll leave ye a few for your own self, Cathal."

"Kind of you," I told him.

Just then Polly Cavanagh joined us, only her face and the white cameo brooch distinguishing her from the night. She brushed past Frankie Casey and fastened her hand on my forearm. It seemed that I could feel the ice of her finger through the material of my sleeve.

"You brought him back to us?"

I guessed whom she meant immediately.

"He's here," I said, "safe and sound."

She peered past me to where Cartwright stood, but she did not go to him.

"The wind is rising, Cathal." Her voice was trembling. "The beginning of my dream is here. God's will be done! I wouldn't tarry here for long. You have your own life to live. I didn't see you in my dream."

Sure enough the wind was tugging at us strongly now, but I noticed it only subconsciously. There was a hidden meaning in the old woman's words, and I had it in my mind to question her when Dan O'Leary spoke:

"You'd better be goin', Cathal. Unless ye want to bide the night. That sea is beginnin' to lep."

I had a brief word with Cartwright before I left.

"We'll go fishing again another day."

"We will, indeed," he returned, "and I'll remember your advice about the writing."

"It won't do any harm anyway," I said.

Dan O'Leary threw off the painter and pushed me away from the pier.

"I'll be over to see you towards the end of the week," he promised. "If I can get afloat."

He could not have known at that moment, nor could I, that we were never to see each other again on top of this world.

CHAPTER THREE

I REACHED the mainland in the small hours, soaked through and standing in a foot of water, to find a knot of people on the pier. I was missed, and they were anxious. A fine kindly spirit binds people who live on the sea. . . . Miss O'Dea, carrying a lantern, shook me by the hand. In the light from her lamp the rain gleamed on her face, and her hair made rats' tails against her lean cheeks.

"I thought I'd be without my mackerel. 'Twas the fish was worrying me." The wind carried the hood of her mackintosh from her head, and her hair streamed out. "'Tis going to be a bad night."

Her prediction proved correct. It was a bad night, and it remained bad for many a long day and night after that. It was a freak storm which hit us. For two whole days it blew with relentless fury from the southwest, driving a hard slanting rain before it and lifting the sea in the Sound. On the third day the wind backed gradually and blew from the north-west. The roar of wind and sea were our persistent companion now, and after a while it seemed that it had always been like this and we had never known a fine day. On Sunday, a week after the rain had started, the weather cleared, and though the wind dropped a bit, the glass was still low. I tapped it optimistically that morning, but contrary to expectations the needle swung

even lower. That evening the wind started again, hurtling out of the darkness, and with it came the rain. I remember sitting at my desk as night fell, looking out at the island, which was veiled behind a torrential downpour, and worrying about David Cartwright. Conditions on the island could not be comfortable now, and for somebody unaccustomed to the rigours of an islander's life there could be grave danger to limb and lung on that wedge of saturated land. I took that worry to bed with me.

I awoke some time later to find the house groaning under the pressure of a hurricane wind, with torrential rain making repeated violent attacks on the window. The darkness was filled with sound, and it seemed as I sat up in bed that I could feel the whole building tremble. I live on the crest of a slight rise outside the village, and had often been buffeted by storms, but there seemed to be a particularly malicious quality in the note of the wind to-night that made me more than a little apprehensive. I got out of bed with the idea of lighting the lamp, but as my foot touched the floor the straining windows burst open and the gale swept in, bringing with it the streaming rain and the terrifying roar of the sea. Blindly I groped my way over to the windows and re-fastened the leaves. The baffled wind moaned fiendishly through the cracks.

I lighted the lamp and set it on the dressing table. In the few seconds that the window had been open the wind had done unbelievable damage. My four pictures had been swept off the wall. A small table beneath the window had been upset, no doubt by the flying curtains, and a patch of water reached over towards the bed. The blankets and sheets were damp. Under the circumstances sleep was unthinkable, so I dressed and went downstairs, tying the catch of the window with a bootlace before I went. The clock in my study showed 4.30 a.m.

The fire was almost out, but I was thankful to see a red glow when I poked it. I placed a few timber blocks

on the embers and made a cup of tea on my oil stove. All this time the wind boomed in the chimney and pressed against the windows. I sipped my tea at the desk and watched the rain flatten itself against the darkened glass. I could not rid my mind of anxiety for the safety of David Cartwright. I visualised him up in that old stone house on the high part of the island with all hell breaking loose around him. I was suddenly assailed by a burning desire to catch a glimpse of the island and foolishly brushed my hand against the glass to peer out. That simple action of mine was destined to be fraught with significance, for as I leaned across the desk to peer out I saw, or thought I saw, a vivid red streak of light move across the centre pane, and vanish.

I had never seen anything like it before, but since the night itself was unique, I was prepared to believe in blood-red lightning.

Dawn brought no relief, and in the late morning I donned oilskins and went down to the village. A fog of driving rain filled the Sound and I could not see the island at all. In the local I found many of my neighbours, each sharing my anxiety for the safety of the islanders. Small Jimmy John, who was our oldest inhabitant, was heating rheumy hands to the fire. His scared face was as white as his beard.

"I was just tellin' 'em, Cathal," he said when I came in, "I've lived many a long day and seed many sights, but I never seed the likes o' this. When the lightnin' turns red 'tis time for us all to make our peace and prepare for judgement. 'As lightnin' comes out o' the east and appears even on the west so shall His comin' be'."

"Jimmy says he saw red lightning last night," said Clancy the publican, drawing me a drink. "Went right into the island or out of it, he says." I knew by the way the publican spoke that he did not believe the story.

I brought my drink over to Small Jimmy John.

"They're laughin' at me," said the old fellow, "and maybe some people think 'tis a grand thing they're doin' when they laugh and make mock o' the weak and aged, but I saw what I saw."

"You did so, Jimmy," I said, raising my voice so that all could hear. "And I'll tell you the time you saw it. After half-past four this morning. As long after that time as it would take to make a cup of tea."

Jimmy's fingers groped at my arm, and his eyes gleamed. "You saw it too, then! God be praised!" He made a swift motion with his hand. "A flash of red lightnin'?"

"The very same," I said. "I saw it, no mistake about that."

Jimmy John turned to the assembly. "Ye'll believe me now." He glanced at me: "Just over the island you saw it?"

I nodded. "As I sit at my desk the island always shows through the centre pane of the window. It was there I saw the lightning."

Small Jimmy John looked at the fire. "'Tis the end of the world I'm tellin' ye, and when the storm lifts ye'll see for yerselves that the island is gone."

Although I never believed the legend, I felt a cold shiver at the spine. I noticed also with satisfaction that Clancy was no longer smiling.

Old Jimmy John's prophecy about the island proved incorrect. The rain stopped that evening, but we had to wait two days before the wind dropped. I spent all the morning of that third day watching the island through the glasses. I do not know what I expected to see, but my binoculars were not powerful enough to show anything in great detail beyond the oddly disturbing fact that nowhere on the island was there a sign of life.

The four houses facing the mainland looked intact, as did the one on the high part of the island. But for a people who had been virtually isolated for two weeks their inactivity was ominous.

I went down to the post office at noon, to find Miss O'Dea full of foreboding.

"Seán Malone was here. Himself and the sergeant are thinking of pulling across to the island."

I was not surprised. This seemed to confirm my fears.

"Is there something wrong with them over there?"

"They're not sure, but Sergeant Mulcahy and a few others were watching the island since morning, and they say there's not a soul to be seen on it."

"I was looking at it myself," I told her. "But maybe after the storm they're sleeping late. Nobody out there would have closed an eye for days."

"The very thing I told Seán," she said.

I put my head outside the door. "I think I'll go down to the barracks and tell the sergeant I'll put him across in my own boat."

"I'd do that," said Miss O'Dea. "They had a mind to ask you, anyway."

I found the sergeant and Seán Malone in the barracks. These two represented the law from here to Dunfooy, and for both there was little enough to do. Seán was a young fair-haired lad and, as I well knew, a good chess player. He was apt on occasions to chaff against the frustrating law-abidingness of our community. The sergeant, on the other hand, was due for retirement soon and had seen enough of unrest in his youth. His hair was prematurely grey and he kept it closely cropped. His lean face did not look very bright, but he was astute enough.

"If the two of you are for the island," I said, "I think we can chance it."

The sergeant buckled his belt and reached for his cap. "I was on my way up to you. If you'll take me across I'd be obliged. I don't feel right about the island, somehow. Seán will take care of things here now that we have a power boat."

It was nearly two o'clock when the sergeant and myself put out. There was still a high sea running, but the rollers were coming in unbroken undulations. We had a bad time in the little boat, and Mulcahy was kept busy baling out. Now and again he made matters worse by insisting on squatting in the bows to examine the island through his glasses. The two of us were soaked before we reached the island. I was not surprised to find the pier deserted, although I knew that coming across we would be in full view of any watchers from the island, and could expect the usual deputation to meet us. It seemed that I had known all along that something was seriously amiss with Innishios.

The swell made the business of negotiating the pier a little difficult. I stood off the shore for a little while and cut the motor to take stock of the situation. Nothing moved on the island, and in the uncanny silence the cries of the wheeling seagulls were frighteningly forlorn. The four houses stared at us vacantly.

Mulcahy put down his glasses, and his expression reflected my own anxiety.

"Something wrong here, Cathal. Do you notice anything about the roofs of the two first cottages?"

Even without glasses I could see that a concave arch had appeared in each thatch roof as if a great weight had pressed down on them.

"Do you notice, too, that although the light is strong behind us the windows are as black as coal?"

I had noticed the peculiar vacancy of the windows.

"I bet you there's not a pane of glass or a sound rafter left on the island," said Mulcahy. "I'm afraid of what we're going to find here."

I started the engine again and nosed towards the pier. We had great difficulty in getting alongside, and when we finally managed it, we had to let the boat drift on two long painters to avoid damage to her sides.

The two of us took stock of our surroundings. I cannot explain the eerie sensation I experienced as I looked towards the houses. It was as though I had come upon a plague-stricken village.

"Let's go up," said Mulcahy, unconsciously speaking in a whisper as though we were in a churchyard. His hatchet face was grim and the muscles bunched on his lean jaw.

Four houses in all made up the village, each typical of the district: squat whitewashed buildings with three small windows in a row and a door overshadowed by the thatch. All the doors faced the mainland and each house stood in its own patch of ground. The first of them was owned by Dan O'Leary. The bit of ground which fronted this was never cultivated, and usually used as a repository for lobster pots, cork floats, tarred ropes, and the rest of the assorted paraphernalia of the lobsterer. Right now the patch of green was swept clean. Not even a scrap of paper remained, and the army of nettles that besieged the south gable were beaten flat. The door stood open and not a pane of glass remained in the windows. A square yard of thatch had been ripped off the roof near the chimney, exposing the lattice work beneath. A long strip of seaweed fastened somehow to the thatch waved in the wind. Mulcahy looked at this speculatively before going inside.

Within was a scene of indescribable destruction. The earthen floor had been torn up as by a crazy plough. A heavy deal table lay smashed in the fireplace, and pictures, lamps, and a weird assortment of twisted things were scattered over the floor. The canvas ceiling had been ripped from the rafters overhead, and remnants of it lay everywhere. The partition which had once divided the small bedroom from the kitchen had disintegrated in rubble, and the two beds were twisted scrap. Incredibly a single picture nailed in one of the corners remained intact. It was a photograph of Dan's father staring with wide shocked eyes at the destruction around him.

CHAPTER FOUR

IN silence we went out and moved along to the next house, where Frankie Casey had lived. The same destruction prevailed here. A long boat he kept in the garden was wedged between the gable and a small outhouse he used as a workshop. The sides of the boat has been stove in. To our relief there was no sign of either Frankie or his family.

Katie Farrington's cottage was less damaged than the other two, but the front door hung on but one hinge. The partition in her house still stood, though the few chairs and a big table were all piled in a heap under the window. The floor under our feet was wet.

The last house, where Polly Cavanagh had spent her eighty years, stood on high ground in the lee of a shelf of rock, and beyond a smashed window it was undamaged. In the kitchen the table was laid for a meal and a cold teapot stood beside a burnt-out fire. In the single bedroom the clothes still lay untidily on the bed and there was a deep impression in the pillow where her head had lain. Of Polly herself there was no sign. Even her clothes had vanished. All that remained of her personal belongings was the white cameo brooch which lay on a chair beside the bed.

Mulcahy picked it up and turned it over in his hand.

"No reason why Polly shouldn't be here. The sea didn't reach this far."

"No reason," I had to admit. "Unless, of course, she thought there was a possibility it would." I felt suddenly full of hope. "All of them for that matter would have sought safety on the highest point of the island. I'd wager Casey and Polly and the rest of them are up with David Cartwright right now."

"I was thinking the same thing," said Mulcahy, "but I can't understand why they didn't meet us."

"Probably sleeping it off," I suggested, as we went outside. "Judging by what we've seen they must have been through a fearful ordeal."

The sergeant nodded. "Anyway we'll go up and see your tenant."

Somehow, as we walked towards the big house the elation I felt at the idea of the entire community finding sanctuary with David Cartwright died. The house, staring down on us, had a bleak air of abandonment. Great dark patches appeared on the roof. Mulcahy never took his eyes off it.

"It would be quite a sea to envelop the whole island," he said, once.

The possibility of the entire island being under water at one time had occurred to me, but the condition of Polly's cottage disproved that theory. I reminded Mulcahy of this, but he made no comment.

A few hundred yards from the house he stopped suddenly. Off the road to the left the heather and shrubbery had been scorched for a wide area. The black circular patch about a hundred paces in diameter was strikingly vivid against the green of the slope.

"I never remember seeing that before."

"Nor I," I admitted. "It certainly wasn't there when I was here last."

"And it has been raining heavily ever since then."

"Well, more or less." I suddenly thought of the red lightning. "This place may have been struck by a thunderbolt." It was a mere guess on my part, since I had never seen anything that had been struck by lightning.

"If it was intentionally blazed as a signal," mused Mulcahy, "somebody would surely have seen it on the mainland."

"It's quite possible."

The sergeant rubbed his chin ruefully. "Your theory about the thunderbolt may be right, though."

We moved up to the house, which at first glance appeared to have weathered the storm exceedingly well, but as we approached, the dark patches I had noticed on the roof resolved into gaping holes through which the lattice framework showed white as bones. All the windows appeared to be intact and—a most heartening omen—a thin spiral of smoke arose from one of the chimneys. At that moment my confidence of finding everybody safe returned.

"The fools we are," I said to Mulcahy. "It's a damn unfunny joke they're playing on us, frightening us like that."

In spite of the appalling damage to the roof I was so convinced that my island friends were unharmed within, that as I went inside, I shouted:

"Come on out of it, O'Leary, you bloody rogue!" Nor was I apprehensive when my voice echoed hollowly through the house. Indeed, in the kitchen, in spite of the sodden plaster board ceiling, we found evidence supporting my hopeful theory. A half-dozen mattresses were piled in a corner, and bundles of blankets were placed untidily on top of them. The table was surrounded by more chairs than the house ever had, and Polly's old shawl was draped over the back of one of them. I sat on the corner of the table, slightly lightheaded with relief. I was more convinced than ever that we were the victims of a bad joke.

"When they're tired of playing the fool they'll show themselves," said I to Mulcahy. "They should have more sense at their age."

The sergeant was looking around, his hawk face still tense.

"I hardly think that Polly Cavanagh would enter into the spirit of a game of hide-and-seek."

His voice chilled me a little as I reached for my pipe.

"Something tells me," said Mulcahy, advancing to the fire and sitting on one of the chairs, "that all is not well."

My apprehension was returning with every word he uttered. I felt suddenly annoyed with him.

"Well they *were* here," I explained rather heatedly. "'That's Polly's shawl, and those mattresses and chairs were collected from the houses below. And it's perfectly safe to assume that the sea never reached here, though the rain certainly came through the roof."

"I agree," said Mulcahy, "but where are the people?"

"Upstairs, playing some damn silly joke," I said, getting hotter. I left the table and stamped to the door.

"O'Leary—Casey!" I called. "For God's sake don't be doing the fool!" I was so angry I did not hear the latch of the back door lift. "Come on down out of there!"

"Save your breath," said a tired voice behind me. "Nobody's here but we three."

I spun round to find David Cartwright framed in the rear doorway.

He wore a sweater and a pair of flannel trousers, and he seemed to have aged ten years since I last saw him. As we watched him he brushed his hair from his eyes and placed the shovel he carried against the outside wall before closing the door. He staggered rather than walked to the fire, and sat in a chair opposite Mulcahy.

The sergeant jerked to his feet.

"Do you keep any whiskey in the house?"

Cartwright indicated the dresser vaguely.

Mulcahy found the bottle at once and splashed some of the spirit into a cup. He brought the bottle back with him and stood it on the table.

"Drink this, Cartwright. You look as if you need it."

My tenant drained the cup in a gulp, and grimaced.

"Thanks!" he said. "That was thoughtful of you."

"I think I'll take one myself," said the sergeant, and did not wait to be invited. He looked at me, but I shook my head. A sense of unreality possessed me, and I felt like one beholding a scene in a dream.

Mulcahy used the same cup as Cartwright, but he was leisurely about it. He held the china cup in his hand as he sat down.

"Take it easy awhile," he said to Cartwright. "Shovelling can be hard work when you're not used to it."

"It was," said my tenant tonelessly, staring at the grey ashes of the dying fire. "I didn't mind the work, I've dug fox holes before now, but this is the first time I've buried anybody in one."

Mulcahy did not seem surprised or shocked, nor for that matter did I. To me, we three still seemed to be as intangible as dream characters.

"A bad business at any time," said Mulcahy, conversationally. "Who was it you buried?"

Cartwright leaned forward in his chair and clasped his hands between his knees.

"Polly Cavanagh. She died two days ago. I don't know much about first aid or medicine. I did what I could. It wasn't much. She died like a child going to sleep. She asked me to bury her on the highest part of the island." He unclasped his hands and dug one fist into the palm of the other. "I didn't have a coffin or a box long enough to hold her. I just wrapped her body in a few blankets. I laid the earth very gently on top of her."

"Had you nobody to help you?" Mulcahy sipped his whiskey. His tone was gently sympathetic.

Cartwright leaned back and threw an arm over the back-rest of his chair.

"No"

"What of Dan O'Leary and Casey and the others?" I blurted out. "They must have been here with you."

My tenant drew his thumb and index finger over his eyes to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"They were."

"Are they on the island?"

"No"

Mulcahy drained his cup and placed it on the stove.

"That's damn good whiskey. Do you know where the others are?"

Cartwright shook his head.

"Are they dead?"

"I don't know that either. At this moment I'm not sure of anything."

Mulcahy leaned over and patted his knee.

"We won't bother you so for a while. But you won't mind if we look around for them?"

Cartwright shrugged.

"You may if you want to, but you'll be only wasting your time. They're not in the house nor anywhere else on the island for that matter."

The sergeant came to his feet. "We'll take your word for it, so. I suppose you have good grounds for saying that!"

"I have," said Cartwright.

"Come on so," said Mulcahy, taking me by the elbow. "We'll go back and let this lad get some sleep."

A thought struck me as we reached the door, and I turned around.

"How was Katie when you last saw her?"

Cartwright smiled wryly. "In tears. She wanted to go with the others, and at the same time she wanted to stay here. She was a lovely woman." His voice was very tired.

I had a mind to press more questions upon him, but Mulcahy pulled me away.

Half-way down to the pier the paralysing sense of unreality began to drop from me.

"Surely," said I to Mulcahy, "you're not going to let the matter drop like that?"

He looked at me with mild interest.

"No point in questioning a man half dead with exhaustion. Besides he's here any time we want him."

"All the same, he might not be telling the truth about the others—about they not being on the island, I mean."

Mulcahy stopped and faced me.

"Do you think he's lying?"

His eyes nonplussed me.

"No," I had to admit.

"Neither do I," said Mulcahy. "I've had a creepy feeling ever since I came on the island. All the same, I'd have a look around if I were you."

I stared at him in surprise. "What will you do?"

"Cross over in the boat and bring a few more to help you. Not that I think we'll find anything contrary to what he has told us, but just for a double check and for the official record."

When he had gone I headed west across the island and circled back towards the house. Near a pinnacle of rock overlooking the sea I found a mound of freshly-dug earth. A few seagulls rose from it as I approached. I stood looking down at it for a moment and then approached the house from the rear. My thoughts were all jumbled and anything but lucid, but the image of Cartwright had attained a sinister significance in my mind.

I walked to the rear of the house and circled it on tip-toe. I did not particularly care if Cartwright saw me, and when I came out front I boldly entered the open doorway. In the kitchen I found my tenant fast asleep on one of the mattresses. Sleep had assuaged the tense lines from his

face, but his eyes were deeply shadowed. There was something childlike in his attitude that was strangely reassuring. I covered him with a blanket and went upstairs. All the rooms were virtually open to the sky and were empty, except for the bedroom which looked on to the mainland. There were neither blankets or mattresses on the bed, and a few pots and dishes were stacked on the floor.

I went downstairs and looked in again at Cartwright. Both hands were visible, and I noticed that the big signet ring was missing. It was so insignificant a point that I wondered afterwards why I noticed it. I left him asleep and went down to the pier. Already I could see that Mulcahy was returning, and I lit a pipe while I waited for them.

He had brought Seán Malone with him and two others.

"Find anything?" he asked, as he stepped ashore.

"I found Polly's grave," I told him. "I doubt if you'll find anybody else. Cartwright is asleep."

We scoured the island until dusk. I am unable to say what the sergeant found in the way of clues, but of the island's former inhabitants we found no sign, nor did we ever see any of them again.

CHAPTER FIVE

NO doubt you will have read the newspaper accounts of the disappearance of the population of Innishios, and remember the sensation it created. Our small unknown village was catapulted into the limelight of notoriety that precipitated an influx of more visitors than we had ever seen. Some were journalists, many plain clothes policemen, and a politician or two determined to let the people know that they at least read the papers; but the vast majority constituted the inevitable army of morbidity scavengers who follow sensation as vultures follow carrion. Overnight, it seemed, our village acquired a floating population of several hundred, and the mystery of Innishios relegated even the most important international news to obscure paragraphs in the newspapers and brief seconds on the radio.

The whole mode of our lives was changed, and I don't believe that we have ever since quite reverted to the old halcyon days that went with obscurity.

But on the night we returned to the mainland, leaving David Cartwright asleep on the floor within a stone's throw of Polly Cavanagh's freshly-dug grave, all this was in the future and not even speculated upon. At that moment the mystery was the concern of but a few. The enigma dominated our minds as we crossed the Sound, but we never doubted that it had a simple and plausible solution.

Even in my most extravagant flights of fancy I never anticipated the mystery it was to become. I had been prepared to accept the possibility of abnormally high seas engulfing the island, and sweeping away its few inhabitants, but the comparatively undamaged condition of Polly's cottage and the house on the hill disproved this theory. The only alternative solution that presented itself to me was that, convinced the island was about to vanish under the sea, as predicted by the legend, the islanders had tried to make the mainland in the height of the storm. But one thing alone favoured this conjecture, the fact that Dan O'Leary's longboat was missing from the island. The strongest argument against it was Dan's own sound sense. In such a venture he would surely have seen nothing but tragedy, and I found it very difficult to believe that he would be a party to such blatant madness. The legend had always been a joke to him, but how can one speculate on the reactions of a man faced with what he believed to be certain death? However, this theory was the only plausible one I could think of, and I proffered it to Mulcahy for what it was worth. His comment was typical of the man :

"I'll keep an open mind on the matter. One man alone knows the truth, and to-morrow he may tell us. Until then it is useless surmising. Anyway, I'll phone my report through to the Superintendent to-night."

Contrary to my expectations I slept like a log that night, a dreamless unconsciousness that found me refreshed in the early morning. As a weather portender the sun was shining a little too brightly for that early hour, but it made a brilliant green world outside, and it was difficult to believe that the events of the day before were not just disturbing phantoms that had invaded my dreams during the night. The two-mile Sound was a strip of twinkling tinsel, a scene so removed from tragedy that for a moment I was prepared to accept yesterday's incidents as a hallucination. Reality came in the shape of Seán Malone. He

lifted the latch as I was brewing some tea. There was a stubble on his chin, and he didn't look refreshed.

"I guessed you should be up by now," he said, as though six o'clock in the morning was a sluggard's hour. "The sergeant is ready to hop over to the island now if you are."

"I'd like a cup of tea, if he can wait."

"He'll have to, then," said Seán, tilting his cap back from his forehead, "because I'm going to have a cup with you." He straddled a chair and folded his arms across the top of it. "The fine long sleep we didn't have last night. When the sergeant phoned his report, the Superintendent raised stinko. Wanted to know why the navy and the air-force weren't alerted, to say nothing of a general S.O.S. to all ships at present steaming in the area. I wouldn't be surprised to find the army called into this." He sipped his tea. "Six more of our fellows are coming from Dunfoyle this morning, and the Super is coming along with them. Mulcahy wants to have a quick word with your friend on the island before they get here."

"Not a bad idea," I said, gulping my scalding tea. "Let's go down so."

Mulcahy was waiting for us by the pier. Behind us the village was still asleep in the bright sunshine, but a breeze lifting from the west had a sting in it.

"Sorry for rooting you out so early," said the sergeant, "but it's important that I talk to Cartwright."

"I was up, in any case," I told him.

"You must have taken your time, then," said he. The acid was in him this morning. Indeed, it was evident that he was a worried man. His lean face had aged a little, and he was so obviously preoccupied as we beat across the Sound that I did not intrude on his thoughts. Although he carried his glasses with him, not once did he put them to his eyes. He sat amidships, his elbows on his knees, studying the water between the footboards.

When we tied up at the pier he stepped ashore and looked around. I do not know if he expected Cartwright to meet us, but my tenant was plainly in his thoughts. As we went up the hill he said :

“What do you know about our friend up there ?”

“Cartwright ?”

“Who else !” The sergeant was bilious this morning.

“As a matter of fact I know very little about him.”

“How did he happen to come here at all ?”

“Well, you know I advertised for a tenant for the house here.”

“He just saw and answered the ad ?”

“Not exactly. A friend of mine who is also a friend of Cartwright wrote me outlining the young man’s requirements.”

“And what were they ?”

“Peace and quiet. I imagine he wanted to do some work.”

Mulcahy deliberated on this for a moment.

“This friend of yours—is he available at any time ?”

I was a little surprised at the question, and at a loss to follow his train of thought.

“I suppose so. He lives in Dublin.”

“Is he likely to remain there for some time ?”

I hesitated a little. “I don’t know. He has lived there for the last ten years, but I don’t see——”

“It’s just a thought,” interrupted Mulcahy. “I don’t think we will ever have to bother your friend.”

Before we reached the house, Cartwright appeared at the door and walked a little way to meet us. He still wore his sweater and flannels, but he looked clean and refreshed. His beard, though adding to his years, invested him with a strange dignity. It also served to mask his expression somewhat. He shook hands with both of us.

“I was expecting you, but not quite so early. Sorry I was so inhospitable yesterday, but I was dead tired.”

He walked back with us to the house. "Did any of you have breakfast?"

"A hurried one," I said. "I don't know about the sergeant."

"He'll have no objection to a bite," Cartwright answered for him, and Mulcahy did not protest.

The sergeant did not touch on the purpose of our visit until our simple meal was over, and even then he took his time. He looked around the room with an air of polite interest that I had learned was deceptive. Cartwright looking impassive, sat easily in his chair, his back to the kitchen stove. I was willing to leave the stage to these two.

"It must have been bad out here during the storm?" observed Mulcahy.

Cartwright lit a cigarette. "It was worse than that. I have seen many storms at sea and on land, but this last affair topped them all. The wind must have reached eighty miles an hour. At times, I swear, half the island was submerged. I watched forty-foot waves break over the houses below, and we had breakers over this one every time the tide was high. Yes, it certainly was bad."

"Was that why the others came up here?"

Cartwright indicated the mattresses behind him. "They brought as much as they could lay their hands on. That was at the peak of the storm. They almost waited too long. The way things turned out we didn't feel very secure up here even. There were times when I thought the sea would undermine the foundations or that we would be blown off the cliff. As it was, the roof was pretty near stripped."

Mulcahy stood up and walked to the door.

"How many came up here?"

"All of them. We were really cramped for a while. It was pouring when we brought Polly up—at least I think it was rain; it was hard to tell the sea from the

rain at that time. I don't think she ever recovered quite from the shock of that trip up here."

Mulcahy did not turn around. "How long did they stay with you?"

Cartwright brushed his hands across his eyes. The freshness had gone from his face, and I thought he was beginning to look a little haggard again. "I don't know exactly—a couple of days and nights, maybe three or four. It's hard to say. Conditions were so bad it was difficult to keep track of time."

Mulcahy turned inwards. Framed against the doorway, he looked inches taller.

"Why did they leave?"

Cartwright shrugged. "I don't understand it myself—that is—not wholly. I think there is a legend about the island sinking under the sea. I know that that influenced them in their decision."

"What decision?" Mulcahy's voice was sharp.

"To get off the island."

"How did you feel?"

"Insecure." Cartwright threw away his cigarette. "But I didn't believe the legend."

Mulcahy compressed his lips. "Dan O'Leary must have been crazy to risk a boat on that sea."

Cartwright looked at him, a glint of mockery in his expression.

"Fear can make the most desperate decisions feasible. In the final analysis if they were convinced the island was going to vanish they hadn't much choice between being washed off the island and risking a boat in the Sound."

"I suppose not," said Mulcahy. "How about Polly? Why didn't she go with the others?"

"She didn't want to. I suppose she felt that she was going to die in any case. One way or the other it mattered little to her how death came, so she didn't bother."

Mulcahy sat down again. His face looked relieved.

"Why didn't you go?"

Cartwright shrugged. "I remember wishing I could. I rarely wanted anything so vehemently in my life as to go with them."

"But you elected to stay with Polly," I said, speaking for the first time.

"That wouldn't have made much difference one way or the other," said Cartwright. "Polly was very near the end when they left. The reason I didn't go was that I had work to do here. Besides, as I told you, I didn't believe the legend."

"And yet you wanted to go with the others," said Mulcahy.

Cartwright came to his feet and walked to the door.

"It doesn't sound sensible, does it? But that's the way it was."

"Well," said Mulcahy, "whatever the reason, you were certainly lucky you didn't go with them. The way things turned out."

Cartwright thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and for a moment there was about him an air of utter dejection.

"I don't know about being lucky," he said. "I wish I had been with them."

Mulcahy and I exchanged a glance. Neither of us knew what to make out of that last remark. The possibility of derangement suggested itself to me, but I rejected the idea. Depression made many a man say things he didn't really mean.

The sergeant reached for his cap. "You'll probably be bothered with a lot of questions in the next couple of days, Mr. Cartwright. The Super is coming over this morning, and I believe some effort is going to be made to recover the bodies." He shook his head. "I gave Dan O'Leary credit for more sense."

Cartwright spoke without turning. "I'm prepared for all the questions. There's little enough I can tell beyond

what I've told you. One thing occurs to me, though. I wonder will there be an inquest on Polly?"

Mulcahy rubbed his chin. "I don't know offhand—considering Polly's great age and the circumstances, I hardly think so, but of course you never can tell. They are very strict about these things nowadays."

My tenant turned suddenly and snapped his fingers. "I almost forgot. All of them left wills of some description before they went away." He crossed to the press and brought a small strong box to the table. It was unlocked, and inside was an assortment of envelopes. He scattered them on the table.

"Each envelope contains all the valuables that each wanted to bequeath to somebody in particular," Cartwright told the sergeant. "I want you to take charge of them."

"They must have guessed they were going to have a pretty slim chance."

"They knew they weren't coming back," said Cartwright.

"What puzzles me," said Mulcahy, "is how they thought this box would be safe with you, since you elected to remain on an island that was supposed to vanish under the sea."

The younger man shrugged. "Maybe they thought the box would be found. I don't know. The whole business was done rather hurriedly and under great strain." He put all the envelopes back into the box. "You can take this with you." He paused a moment and rubbed his stubble ruefully. "You'll find an envelope containing Polly's effects in there. She left the sum of two hundred pounds, and you will see from what she has written that I am one of the beneficiaries. I don't need the money, so you can divide my share among the other people she has named."

Mulcahy picked up the box and tucked it under one arm. "We'll see what the Super says."

Cartwright saw us to the boat. On the way down, we paused at the patch of scorched earth.

"We noticed that yesterday," said the sergeant. "Any clue as to how it was caused?"

"I thought it might have been struck by lightning," I said.

Cartwright shrugged. "It's quite possible."

"Red lightning," said Mulcahy, with dry sarcasm, and I noticed Cartwright start visibly. He looked at the policeman sharply, and away again.

"The sergeant doesn't believe I saw a red streak in the sky a few nights ago," I said.

"He should," said my tenant, calmly, "because I saw it, too."

"What night was this?" asked Mulcahy.

Cartwright shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't give you dates, but it was on the night that Dan O'Leary and the others left the island. The storm was at its worst then."

CHAPTER SIX

THE very strange thing about the tragedy of Innishios—and I was to recall it some time later—was that we who lived on the mainland just across the Sound from the island, felt no sense of tragedy whatever at the loss of the islanders. The banner headlines with which the newspapers featured the story, the pathos of the most sentimental journalist, failed somehow to bring home to us the reality of our bereavement. I knew and liked Dan O'Leary and Frankie Casey, and I knew their children. Between myself and Katie Farrington was a genuine affection. For all of us, Polly Cavanagh symbolised the Eternal Woman, Ireland. A bond of friendship bound us all together, and yet when I knew for certain that I would never see any of them again I felt shallow and selfish because I couldn't stimulate a sense of sorrow. I felt somehow that I was betraying my loyalty to the dead by not feeling a sense of loss.

I often pondered on this strange phenomenon in the days that followed, but could not arrive at a satisfactory explanation. The nearest I got to the enigma was that they all went together. To my mind the sting of death is left in the living. Death, after all, is as natural as being born, and the dead cannot suffer any more, whereas the agony of loneliness remains with those who survive. In the case of Innishios, death had been merciful. With one

fell swoop, as it were, it had taken them all; spreading her dark mantle wide enough to envelop husband, wife and children. None were to know the sorrow of parting. They passed on collectively, holding each other's hand down the valley of death and up to the brightness beyond. So I reasoned, and found a measure of comfort in it and an explanation for my own hardness.

But for the rest—the excitement which followed—we felt we had a proprietary interest in every activity. We were treated as chief mourners. Nobody asked us to do a thing, and we had every opportunity of watching the official machine go into action.

Naval cutters scoured the Sound like coursing greyhounds and swept hundreds of square miles of sea. Dragging operations went on for days. Ships sailing within fifty miles of the coast were asked to watch for bodies and wreckage. The air was never free from the persistent drone of aircraft. Every available sleeping space in the village was booked. Cars were often parked bumper to bumper for a mile along the sea front. The only public-house went dry twice during the first week; and, an important factor, the weather held.

During all this activity I saw David Cartwright once or twice. He was standing up to the ordeal of the affair remarkably well. He was definitely the hero of the piece. At the inquest on Polly Cavanagh, Mulcahy had, for some reason, stressed the fact that David Cartwright had wanted to leave the island with the others at the height of the storm, and although he guessed that to remain behind meant certain death, he would not leave the side of the dying woman. The Sunday papers played this up big, and featured exclusive pictures of my bearded tenant. His expression in all of them plainly showed that he was not enjoying the experience of being photographed.

The history of our community, staid and simple enough, was whipped into such a romantic morsel that at the time

we had difficulty in recognizing ourselves. The legend of the vanishing island appeared in a startling number of variations in most of the papers. Meanwhile, we sat back and enjoyed it all. It was pleasant to be the focal point of attention. I had been away from it so long that the experience was not unpleasant. But it soon palled, and after the first two weeks, when as yet no sign of the islanders or their boat was discovered, we were a little relieved to find ourselves reverting to normal. The cutters vanished from the Sound, as did the aircraft overhead, and with them went the sightseers. Our tremendous mystery dwindled from columns to paragraphs, and finally disappeared altogether, and we gladly picked up the threads of our familiar way of life.

Only one man, to my knowledge, regretted the retreat of the floating population we had carried. That was Clancy, our local publican.

"Man alive," he said to me one day of the third week, "the unholy thirst of them newspapermen! To say nothing of the visitors. They'd drink the cape off Saint Paul! And them women!—drink a bottle of stout with any man—long gullets and bullet eyes and paint and powder and all. Another week and I'd have balanced my losses of last year." For years, according to himself, Clancy had been running his business at a loss solely for the benefit of the community.

"Still you went a fair way towards recovering them," I consoled him.

"I suppose I did," he admitted, grudgingly. "Still it might be the making of the place. We might attract a lot of tourists next summer." He did not sound enthusiastic, and he wiped the bar in melancholy circles. "What we need here is a committee—a development committee."

"What could they develop?" I wanted to know.

He looked at me in astonishment. "They could blast the rocks and make a beach. That's all we want; a patch

of sand so that the toffs can build little sand castles with their kids, and burn themselves to a cinder."

"If they blasted the rocks in front of your pub," I reminded him, "the sea would undermine your foundations in a year."

"Ah!" said Clancy, with an air of one who had thought of every contingency. "There's places to blast and places to blast. Anyway, if we did no blasting at all there are other ways and means of drawing the crowd."

At that moment Joxer McGrath lifted his head from his arm and brought his palm down on the bar.

"Gimme another drink, Jimmy boy."

Every community has its skeleton. Joxer was ours. He was unpopular with everybody, and he knew it. Drink was, perhaps, the reason for his unpleasantness, for he always had drink in him, but even when he was fairly sober he was an unsavoury character with a grudge against the world and everybody in it. Still, with all that, he was an excellent craftsman on boats, and even I rarely went elsewhere if I wanted a repair job done to my craft. A boat built by this small middle-aged man floated squarely on an even keel and was as seaworthy as a liner, while a repair job was made as good as new. He lived a mile around the coast from the village, and divided his time between Dunfoy and ourselves, for which small consideration we were truly thankful. Right now he had obviously too much to drink, and to give Clancy his due he hated drunkenness.

"I think you have enough, Joxer," he told the boat-builder.

The small man wagged his untidily-mopped head and glared under jutting brows.

"Do you tell me so? Amn't I the best judge of that?"

"All the same," said Clancy, who was a quiet man, "I'll give you just one more."

"One was all I had in mind," mumbled Joxer. He

stared across at me and winked. "Clancy is worried about the crowd going on him. God Almighty, some people never have enough!"

"Easy now, Joxer," warned Clancy.

"Easy I'm takin' it," replied the other, unperturbed, wrapping his fingers around the glass Clancy placed before him. "How much would you give me if I got them back for you, Clancy? How much?"

"Take your drink," said Clancy, making a disgusted face at me.

"You wouldn't give a body the itch," said Joxer. "But mark my words, if I wanted to I could have them all back and ten hundred more with them." He took a pull from his glass and set it down with an unsteady hand. "But that wouldn't be smart. I know where I can get money for keeping them away." He nodded at Clancy. "Laugh that off." He caught my eye again and tapped his temple with a finger. "Up there you want it."

He finished his drink and buttoned his coat. "Ye'r' all a cocky lot of bastards, anyway. But I know something ye don't know, with all yer education." He walked straight enough to the door, and paused there. "Lost at sea with all hands," he said, "to say nothing of the hero on the island. There's no doubt about it, but our navy and our air force and the whole guards siochana are a stupid lot of gomoges." He spat on the floor. "And where do that leave you, Clancy?" He left us then, roaring with laughter.

Clancy blew out his cheeks when he was gone.

"The one thing you must have in my line," he said, "is restraint. Bags of restraint. Bags of it."

"I wonder how he could bring the crowd back," I mused.

"If he blew his brains out or drowned himself in the Sound I'd run a free excursion from Dublin for the occasion," said Clancy. He wiped his hands on his apron.

"After all them city folks the likes of him is dirt. He pulls down the reputation of a respectable place."

I left Clancy to his grievances and went up the hill to my house. I found myself thinking of all Joxer had said. His mysterious innuendoes filled me with a vague uneasiness, but by nightfall I had forgotten him and went to bed early.

The next day I went over to the island. Although I had had three men make the roof and the ceiling of the big house as good as new I had determined earlier in the week to ask David Cartwright to stay with me on the mainland. Now that he was alone on the island his presence out there caused many problems. He had no boat of his own, and the problem of having sufficient stocks of provisions could well be serious in the event of bad weather. My own home was big enough for two, and I felt that I would enjoy his company. I was half-way across the Sound when I saw a boat pull away from the island pier. I was too far away to make out with certainty who its single occupant was, and I deliberately steered a point or two off course to verify my suspicions. The boat, like my own, was powered by an outboard engine. It was not making for the village on the mainland, but cruised parallel with the island. As I closed the distance between us I could see that the craft was painted white with a green stripe around the gunwale, but that was all I could see, for the boat suddenly put on speed and began to draw away rapidly. Not a little bewildered, I put the bow of my boat around and proceeded to the pier, to find David Cartwright waiting for me.

He helped me tie up and gave me a hand ashore.

"That was Joxer McGrath's boat that pulled away," I said.

Cartwright followed my gaze. "It was," he said simply.

"I don't know if you are well acquainted with him," I said, "but he's rather an unpleasant character."

"You don't have to tell me," returned Cartwright. "It's perfectly obvious."

The sight of the green and white boat had brought the unpleasant interlude in Clancy's public house back to my mind.

"I hope he's not bothering you in any way!"

Cartwright pursed his lips. "To tell the truth I never wanted to kick anybody's backside more than his, but they say he's an expert on boats."

"He does a good job at a price," I admitted. "But what would you be wanting with a boat?"

"I admit my wants are simple," said Cartwright, "but I will need foodstuffs now and again, and that means getting over to the mainland. I thought of having Frankie Casey's boat repaired."

I feigned surprise. "Surely you're not thinking of remaining on this island alone?"

Genuine astonishment showed in his glance. "That is my intention." I thought that the strain of the past two weeks showed in his face. "I can't see why I should change my plans. This place suits me admirably."

"You'll go crazy over here."

"I'd go crazy anywhere else," he replied, with conviction.

I attempted to dissuade him. "I'd be happy to have you over in my house for as long as you care to stay. There would be nobody to bother you there."

He rested his hand on my forearm. "Thanks, but I prefer to remain here. Of course, you're my landlord, and if you choose to evict me that's a different story."

"No fear of that," I assured him, "but I will admit that I would be easier in my mind if I had you off the island. It was different when the rest were here. I could rely on them to take care of you. But now that they're gone—"

"I can take care of myself," he said quietly.

"What about the weather? The last storm lasted two weeks, as you know. I've known them to last months."

"I intend to keep a month's provisions as a basic store."

I shrugged my shoulder. "Well, if you're determined to stay I can't do anything about it."

Cartwright smiled suddenly, and I marvelled at the transformation this always effected. "Your motives are good, and I really am thankful for your concern. But it is important that I remain here."

"You'll have your way, so," I told him. "One bit of advice I will offer, and that touches on Joxer McGrath. You have a slippery customer there."

"I can take care of Joxer, if need be," said Cartwright, and something in his voice and expression allayed my anxiety about him in this respect.

"Have you begun to work on your writing again?" I asked him, by way of changing the subject.

He became enthusiastic at once. He told me he had made wonderful progress in the last week. "I do most of my work in the evening and at night. My stock of paraffin and candles is a bit low."

"I could send you over a drum," I told him.

"I'd appreciate that," he said, "but you needn't trouble yourself. Joxer McGrath is bringing a drum in the morning."

I stared my surprise. "Is he coming back here?"

Cartwright smiled at my expression. "He has to. Frankie Casey's boat has a few holes in it. Joxer plans to fix it on the island."

I was not the least happy about this. "I simply can't stand that fellow," I said inadequately.

"You're not alone," said Cartwright, and we left a distasteful subject at that.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I SAW my tenant quite frequently after that. Once a week he came over to the mainland for provisions, and he never failed to call on me. He became much more sociable with the other villagers, too, and as summer passed and autumn began to merge with winter, he became accepted as one of us. His magnificently bearded figure became part of the scenery and our lives. Occasionally, too, he accompanied me on a fishing or shooting trip, and I found him at all times a very pleasant companion. Because of our common interest we spent hours in front of the fire talking of writing and writers and of what was still to be written, and a warm bond of friendship grew between the two of us.

With Miss O'Dea he was a firm favourite, and she went to considerable trouble to have a special stock of type-writing ribbons and paper for him. Seán Malone and Mulcahy found in him a tough opponent in chess, and though he lost a few times to the latter, Seán found him invincible.

The secret of Cartwright's popularity was hard to explain. Small talk, which forms the major portion of our conversation, was unknown to him. Whatever he had to say was of some import, but he was courteous to everybody, even Joxer McGrath, who was in his company more often than I liked. During the famous chess matches in

the police barracks, Cartwright often spent the entire evening without speaking a word, but for all his silence he counted in any company. So much so indeed that in any of our impromptu debates in Clancy's, although he took no part and rarely offered even a comment, when he left we felt that we had lost a powerful contributor to the solution of the immediate problem with which we were grappling.

Old Jimmy John, who was still disappointed because Innishios had not disappeared under the sea as he predicted, found in my tenant a mirror that seemed to reflect his own wisdom. At times, when he uttered an aphorism seasoned with the profundity of his great years, he winked at Cartwright or nodded his grey head, or, if he was sitting beside him, nudged him with his elbow. Any one of these gestures allied himself with my tenant against the appalling ignorance of the rest of us. Cartwright treated him kindly, and I could see develop between these two a genuine affection which made the old man very happy. Jimmy John seemed to enjoy a certain prosperity these days, too. His tobacco pouch was always full and his thirst never went unsated for too long. Besides this, it was quite common to see him wearing a shirt or a sweater or even a pair of trousers we had seen on Cartwright. It was in very little ways like that that our islander disclosed his kindly heart and made himself one of us. Once or twice, for purely selfish reasons now, I tried to prevail on him to make his home with me. Even Mulcahy, using the darkening Atlantic as a lever, could not persuade him, but even across the two miles of sea it was comforting to know that he was there, still a neighbour.

Only at Christmas did he leave his fastness for longer than a day. That was when he came to have Christmas dinner with myself and Mulcahy in my house. He remained overnight, since none of us were in any shape for weathering the Sound, but early the following morning

he was up and gone. I found a note from him in the kitchen. He thanked me in his usual thoughtful way, and listed the Christmas he had spent with me among the most enjoyable of his life. I did not see him for two weeks after that, because of frequent intermittent gusts from the northwest that lifted the Sound and drenched the world with snow and sleet. My first meeting with him in the new year was to be dramatic and significant, and the chain of events that preceded this climax was activated in the first instance by Joxer McGrath.

I had known for some time that the boatmaker was an occasional visitor to the island long after the repairs to Frankie Casey's boat were effected. I always found the man so unpleasant a character that I took it for granted that when Cartwright's boat was seaworthy again he would no longer be welcome on Innishios. To my surprise I discovered that some months after any reason for his visits was removed, he still crossed the Sound occasionally. On these trips he never stayed long, and was off the mainland only barely long enough to make the trip and return. These trips did not worry me unduly, because I had perfect confidence in Cartwright's ability to take care of himself and I knew he was aware of McGrath's type. Still I wondered about the boatmaker's visits, and once I quizzed Cartwright about them.

"I don't own the island," he said, a little abruptly, I thought. "I imagine he's free to come and go as he pleases. He doesn't bother me."

After that, being unable to think of anything on the island to justify McGrath's visits, I wondered a little more. As for McGrath himself, he was a changed man these days. The world did not seem to have so much amiss with it. On the few occasions I met him he was almost pleasant, and one good factor in his favour as far as I was concerned was his unstinting praise of Cartwright, which was in effect a complete reversal of his previous opinion.

"There's a real gentleman," I heard him say one night, referring to the islander. "A fine upstanding man, not too stuck-up to talk to a body." He gulped down his drink. "Not like some of the bastern people around here that I could mention." I could perhaps have read some significance in the glance he threw at me, but I let him be. He knew I disliked him even as much as he disliked me, but I doubt if this occasioned any loss of sleep for either of us. That was why I was surprised to find him outside my door early one morning some weeks after Christmas. His knock had been peremptory, not unlike Danny Coffey's tattoo, and I opened the door expecting an early post. The sight of Joxer under normal circumstances would have been surprising, but his aspect on this winter morning was so astonishing that I simply gaped at him. He could never at any time be considered a neatly-dressed man, but he always managed a semblance of convention. As he stood framed in the doorway he looked like a very disreputable scarecrow. One lapel was torn from his coat for its entire length and hung down like a forgotten piece of harness. Two bloodstained kneecaps were visible through rents in his trousers, and one length of his braces hung from beneath his coat like a peculiar forked tail. His wild mop of hair stood on end, and a superficial cut which had bled into one of his eyebrows looked freshly congealed. He rubbed his right elbow ruefully as he allowed me to vet him.

"Ye might well gape," he said sourly, and brushed past me.

I followed him into the study.

"What happened to you? Did you fall?"

He sat down on a chair and rested his right arm on the table. "'Tis no fall I took." His eyes beneath the jutting brows flashed malevolently. "But I was put upon. See that!" He held up his left palm, and I could see that the skin had been stripped from the ball of his thumb. "The right one's no better, and but for them I'd have taken that

bastern friend of yours and pulled out his cursed gizzard."

Even then I never associated Cartwright with Joxer's condition.

"Who did this to you, Joxer?"

"Who do you think?" he snarled. "Amn't I after tellin' ye? Yer fine friend over on the island."

I stared at him incredulously. Then I remembered suddenly the expression that was on Cartwright's face the day he told me he could take care of Joxer if the need arose. Shocked as I was by Joxer's condition I could not visualise my tenant being unreasonably brutal.

"If Cartwright did this to you he must have had good reason."

I doubt if Joxer expected sympathy from me. He only sneered at my comment.

"Birds of a feather! Ye didn't think I expected ye to say otherwise? Whatever reason he had he'll pay dearly for this." He lifted his right hand to bring it down on the table, and winced at the pain. "He signed his death warrant to-day, mark my words."

The malevolence of the man made me apprehensive for Cartwright, but I did not betray my alarm.

"I wouldn't monkey with Cartwright again, McGrath, if I were you. Next time he'll probably break you in two."

"They'll be no next time for him," said Joxer. "When I meets him again I won't be alone, me cock!"

"If you organize a band against Cartwright you'll put your head in a noose," I warned him sternly. I was really afraid for the islander now, for I knew that this man would stop at nothing to avenge himself. "Sergeant Mulcahy would run you out of the village."

Joxer was unimpressed. In fact he permitted himself a mirthless snigger.

"'Tis Mulcahy will be with me when I visits your friend again, and then his head will be in the noose where it should have been months ago. Nine people don't

vanish off an island without something happenin' to 'um."

He grinned at me suddenly, displaying an unsuspected solitary dog tooth. "That's makin' ye think, isn't it?" He leaned back in his chair. "For weeks I watched them guards drag the Sound, with the army and the navy and the aeroplanes lendin' a hand, and all of them lookin' for bodies and for wreckage and the devil knows what. I used to laugh at them bastern fools, and when they went away I left 'um go." He plucked at my sleeve. "D'ye know why?"

I stared at him with undisguised surprise. Every word he uttered was charged with some sinister menace.

"Because," he said, answering his own question, "I wasn't an informer." He spat on the floor and turned up his lacerated palms. "And this is my thanks."

As I stared from his palms to the spittle on the floor a hot spark of anger glowed deep inside me. I longed to take this evil man by the shoulders and the seat of his pants and run him out of the house. But his malicious babble had filled me with a vague disquiet. I fought down my anger and sat down opposite him.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"Ye'r disposed to listen now, are ye?" he mocked me. "Well I'm not *tryin'* to tell ye anything. I'm *tellin'* ye. Did it never strike ye that with all the watchin' and the lookin' and draggin' and haulin' that not a sight of nine people was found? Not even a scrapeen of Dan O'Leary's boat?"

I felt oddly cold. Instinctively I seemed to be waiting for some terrible disclosure.

"Or did it ever strike ye as bein' funny that Dan O'Leary, born and bred on the island, out in all weathers, man and boy, would be such a born fool as to try to pull a boat across the Sound in the height of the storm?"

He had touched on the one irreconcilable factor of the mystery that had remained fixed in my memory. For some

unaccountable reason I was suddenly on the defensive. It seemed important that Joxer should be convinced that Dan O'Leary's apparent madness was justified.

"If Dan believed that the island was going to sink there was nothing else he could do."

Joxer sucked in his upper lip and blew it out again.

"If ye believe that, ye're a bigger fool than I took ye for. Dan O'Leary's boat couldn't have got off the island that night nor any other night or day for that matter. And I can prove it."

It is strange, but at that moment I believed with an odd sinking of heart that Joxer undoubtedly had proof of what he said.

I bluffed desperately. "I'd like to hear your proof."

"I'll show ye," he said, "if ye'll care to come with me."

"Where to?" I suspected a trick.

"My place. We could run over there in my boat."

I reached for my coat, and Joxer sprang to his feet.

"I'll show the whole scalding lot of ye that nobody can muss me up and get away with it."

Joxer had not tied up at the village pier, but had pulled his boat up on the shingle half-way between the village and my house. The tide had receded somewhat, and we had to drag the craft a considerable distance to the water. The small man was obviously in pain when we were finally afloat, and his right hand was bleeding. He opened the throttle full and went out on the Sound to make a wide semicircular sweep, an obvious manoeuvre to avoid being seen from the village. I took some measure of comfort from this. It was apparent that whatever Joxer wished to prove he wanted to prove it to me alone.

The house of Joxer McGrath was almost completely hidden from the sea. A jungle of vegetation surrounded it closely, and from the heart of this maze a rudely improvised slipway of giant boulders ran out a short distance on the sand. Dark tawny sea-weed covered it like lichen, and

the stones were black and mottled with barnacles. When McGrath and I came ashore the low tide was a considerable distance from the slipway. The boatmaker pulled the boat up on the sand and led the way to the house. The approach to it from the beach was through a cavernous dome of greenery and up a steep pathway to a small patch of ground. The unruly hand of neglect lay heavily on the thatched cottage. The plaster had fallen in large patches from the walls, and here and there cardboard and bundles of protruding rags had replaced panes of glass in the windows. The unkempt thatch on the roof supported parasitical clumps of weed, while a twisting pathway wound its way through the ranks of a besieging army of nettles.

We skirted the path, McGrath leading the way, to where a big shed, in far better repair than the house, stood behind a curtain of foliage poised at the head of the slipway. The wide front gates were padlocked, and the boatmaker searched with difficulty in his waistcoat pocket before he produced the key.

"Ye're in for the biggest shock of yer life," he told me as he unlocked the doors. "Just take a gander in there and tell me what ye see."

I stepped behind his back and peered over his shoulder. For the moment I was unable to grasp the reality of what I saw. I was but vaguely conscious that Joxer was laughing, perhaps at my expression, but I felt no resentment. My mind was much too busy grappling with the implications of the thing I beheld. In those brief seconds the whole fabric of the past months was torn to shreds.

Rigged a foot or so above the ground on a pair of cross-legged trusses was Dan O'Leary's boat.

I had been aboard her too often to be mistaken. I knew every plank of the clinker-built craft, and I did not have to look at the peculiar crooked keel, which always gave her a crab-like leeway, to recognize her. The oarlocks were in place in the gunwale holes, and a pair of oars lay aboard.

I was so stunned that Joxer was speaking long before his words registered.

"—an if that's not proof, what is? 'There's enough evidence to hang yer friend on the island."

"Where did you find the boat?"

Joxer began to close the gates. "I didn't find it. The day before the big mackerel break I towed it over from the island to put two new planks in her." He ran his sleeve under his nose. "Durin' the storm it was snug an' dry here. An' all the time nine people was supposed to be drowned out of her."

I was grasping at straws. "Frankie Casey——"

"Don't try to do the cejit," said Joxer. "Frankie Casey's boat was found on the island, and that's all the boats that ever was on the island."

The issue had to be faced. "Why didn't you tell the police about this?"

Joxer locked the gates and pocketed the key. "I often asked myself the same question," he said. "I don't want to get anybody into trouble, and I'm no informer. I never wanted to get mixed up with the police."

"You're going to get mixed up with them pretty fast when they discover that you deliberately suppressed evidence. . . ." I felt suddenly good again. "You may not know it, Joxer, but you're in serious trouble yourself. The Government must have spent a great sum of money in a fruitless search for that particular boat."

A momentary spark of apprehension lighted the depths of his eyes, but it was gone again.

"An' what d'ye say to ye'r friend on the island? When the guards sees this boat what about him, eh? The hero of the island lying his head off to the whole army and navy and police force. 'They thought the island was sinkin,' says he, 'and off they went in Dan O'Leary's boat,' says he, and all the time I suppose they're lyin' around somewhere with split skulls—buried, I suppose, like poor

old Polly. All the work of your fine friend over there who wants to be alone so much he could kill nine people to be that way."

The present situation suddenly tied up with Joxer's conversation in Clancy's public house when he inferred that he could have all the visitors and sightseers back if he wanted to. It also tied up with his periodic visits to the island, and perhaps accounted for his dishevelled condition this morning.

"You've been blackmailing Cartwright," I said.

The small man looked at me sharply, but he did not seem alarmed.

"Let's say that he's been payin' the rent for Dan O'Leary's boat here. An' that's *more* damnin' evidence, if ye like. He was willin' to pay to keep my mouth shut."

"Until this morning," I said.

At this, McGrath swore terribly, and for some reason I felt elated by this rage. If Cartwright feared Joxer disclosing the whereabouts of Dan O'Leary's boat, it seemed strange, to say the least, that he had deliberately antagonised him.

"Like I said, he signed his death warrant this morning," snarled Joxer.

"Then why haven't you told the police?"

He brooded on this a moment. Then: "I've told ye a thousand times I'm no informer." His manner changed a little, and his dog tooth made a brief appearance as he smiled craftily. "I came to you because I know ye're a friend of his. There's many a thing a man will do for a friend, and many more a friend will do to prevent that friend swingin'. I'm an old man and me wants is simple. It wouldn't take much to have me keep my mouth shut."

"What did Cartwright give you so far?"

Joxer spat on the grass. "A lousy five pounds a week. But that kind of livelihood is no good any more. There's no security in it. Livin' out there on the island is too

insecure, so I made a proposition to him this morning."

I didn't ask him what it was, because I knew he was going to tell me in any case.

"I offered to sell him Dan O'Leary's boat. I did more, I told him that as soon as he bought it I'd tow it outside with a half-ton of cement on board and stave the planks in."

His little eyes snapped excitedly, and he ran the tip of his tongue over his lips.

"How much did you ask for the boat?"

"A thousand pounds, and no questions asked."

I gave a low whistle. "No wonder he beat you up."

"He puts small value on his neck," said Joxer. "Maybe his friend would be more sensible."

"Are you offering me the boat?" I asked him.

"'Tis a fine craft."

"For the same price?"

"'Tis cheap at that. I'd rather let ye have it for a thousand than take it to the guards for nothing."

"If the guards ever saw this you're good for five years in jail, Joxer," I reminded him.

He made a small animal sound and lifted his hands, palms upright. The torn skin was raw and the blood had congealed. "If I don't get my rights on this I'll inform on Cartwright, be sure of that. Mark my words, and mark 'um well; if money don't stop me, I'd not only go to jail but down to hell itself to bring your friend to the gallows."

Watching his snapping eyes and seeing how the foam flecked the corners of his lips, I could readily believe that this evil man's vindictiveness was boundless.

"I'll have to think it over, Joxer," I stalled. "A thousand pounds is a lot of money."

"I give you the same time as I gave him," said Joxer. "Wan week from to-day. After that his head is in a noose, and Clancy will be doin' a roarin' trade again."

I went out through the jungle that encircled the house and walked home along the coast road.

CHAPTER NINE

I WENT over to Innishios in the evening. Since my meeting with Joxer that morning I had reviewed the past months in the light of the boat-maker's revelation, and not one second of it made sense any more. Not for a moment did I believe that Cartwright had murdered nine people, but my friendship with him did not blind me to the fact that there were many serious implications in his deliberate deception of the police authorities. The possibility that Dan O'Leary might have borrowed a boat while his own one was being repaired occurred to me, but I realized that the owner would have shown up long ago. The more I thought about the affair the more baffling it became. I had spent enough time with Cartwright to know that there were many traits of his character hidden deeply under his taciturnity, but I could have still staked my life that he was no killer. Whatever his reason for lying about the islanders, I felt, as I steered the boat through the dusk, that he had nothing to do with their death.

To my surprise he was waiting for me on the pier. He tied up the boat securely and gave me a hand ashore. All the time I felt his eyes on me. It was not usual for me to pay him a visit so late, since I knew he worked in the evenings.

"A mite late for a social call," he said, although he did

not sound surprised. "But come early, come late, you are very welcome."

"I felt I had to see you," I told him, as yet unable to meet his eyes. "We must have a talk."

"There are worse ways of passing an hour or two," he said casually.

I felt cold standing in the wind, but it was not the wind was making me cold.

"Will we go up to the house?"

"We will so," he said, turning on his heel. He had already adopted our local style of phrasing words.

We climbed the hill together, he just a pace ahead of me all the time.

Once in the house, while he busied himself with the business of lighting the lamp, I sat down at the bright stove and wondered what my approach would be. He saved me the trouble.

"You must have found Joxer McGrath entertaining to-day," he said, as he set the lamp on the table. There was just a hint of bitterness in his voice. He smiled crookedly at my expression.

"When he left me I watched him through the glasses. He went into your house and I watched the two of you pull away afterwards. I was expecting you long before now." He leaned on the table, and in the lamplight his face was full of shadows. "I don't think I was mistaken. You were with Joxer?"

"Yes," I answered, relieved that his tone was neither guilty nor apprehensive. "He showed me Dan O'Leary's boat."

"I thought he would."

"He offered to sell it to me," I said.

Cartwright turned up the wick of the lamp.

"An expensive buy I should imagine."

"Just a thousand pounds and a week to consider it."

"And after that?"

I lit my pipe. Cartwright's calmness was reassuring.

"After that, if he doesn't get the money I think Joxer will show the boat to Sergeant Mulcahy."

Cartwright sat down. From where I sat he looked very tired.

"You haven't got a thousand pounds?" He smiled wryly. His tone was half bantering, but I answered him seriously.

"No, I haven't."

"Neither have I. If I had I think I'd buy the damn boat."

I felt suddenly sick in the stomach. On the face of it it seemed like an admission of guilt. But then a strange thing happened. As I sat looking at him I knew that whatever this man had done I was still his friend and was prepared to stand by him.

"I might be able to borrow the money," I said.

His eyes fastened on me for an instant, and I felt the warmth in their regard before he glanced away again.

"I'll remember that—always. But I could never pay you back. In any case I don't think that the necessity of having it will arise. Joxer has given me a week. All I need is about two to four days." He thumbed a calendar on the table, and I could see that all the numbers of the preceding months and more than half of the present month had been crossed off with a pencil. His last remark frightened me. I asked him what he meant, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"I was merely thinking out loud."

In the silence that descended on us I noticed that the dates he had crossed off extended exactly two days in advance of the present date.

He stood up suddenly and lit a cigarette. He puffed at it in obvious agitation.

"Well, you haven't told me what you think of Joxer's story," he said at last.

"I don't know what to think," I answered truthfully. "That's why I came over to-night. I thought you might enlighten me."

"I told you what happened."

"Dan O'Leary and the others could hardly put to sea in a dream boat," I said dryly.

He stood facing the stove, presenting a stern profile to me.

"If I told you that they put off in some other boat you wouldn't believe me."

I was surprised and disappointed that he was adopting this attitude. "There was only one boat on the island during the storm. That was Frankie Casey's. It had a sizeable hole in it when we discovered it, but it had obviously not been afloat. It was jammed between the gable of his house and the bank where he usually keeps it. It would be a strange coincidence if the sea washed it ashore in exactly the same spot."

"Surely Dan could have borrowed a boat," said Cartwright.

I shook my head. "If that is so the owner seems surprisingly disinterested in his property. No, David, you know and I know that Dan O'Leary never left this island as you said. Look, man! I'm accusing you of nothing nor am I asking you to tell me anything if you don't feel like it. I come to you as a friend who wants to help if he can."

He began to pace up and down, driving his right fist into the palm of his other hand. He stopped suddenly in front of me. "You know what Joxer thinks?"

"I don't believe you murdered the whole lot of them and spirited away the bodies. If I did I wouldn't be here. One more murder would matter little to a man who had nine to his credit."

He looked at me steadily.

"What *do* you think of this?"

I shrugged. "I'm baffled. But if I were Sergeant Mulcahy I would want to ask some questions in the light of the discovery of Dan O'Leary's boat."

He began to pace the floor again.

"What would he want to know?"

The man's *naïveté* was astounding. "He'd want to know what happened to nine people. He'd want to know why your explanation of their disappearance was a calculated lie. And he would most certainly be interested in why you were paying money to Joxer to conceal evidence."

"Evidence of what?"

"Evidence that you had lied for a specific reason, and something very sinister would be read into that reason."

Cartwright stopped briefly at the table. "I suppose it does look damning, and yet I swear to you that I did not harm a hair on the heads of those people. If you knew me better you would know that such a thing would be entirely foreign to my nature."

"And yet," I said, "I found Joxer badly mauled this morning."

He had turned away while I was speaking and stood now at the darkened window. The fingers of the hand he held by his side worked convulsively and were still again. "I simply pushed him," he said, without turning. "He fell and rolled on to the pier. I could have killed him then—easily. I remember suppressing the urge to do so. But I let him go, although I knew he could destroy me."

"He was blackmailing you," I said.

Cartwright turned from the window. "Oh, he was easy at first. He thought I was some kind of a criminal deity. After all, a man with nine murders to his credit is no common person. He was prepared to pay me homage rather than demand anything. Joxer is an evil man. But as he became more and more familiar he shed some of his awe of me. Then he began to ask for money—small

sums to begin with, and I could manage them easily." He sat down by the table. The fire had died down and the cold of the night outside was beginning to steal into the kitchen.

"But his silence became more and more expensive," he continued, "and lately he began to make impossible demands. I had not unlimited capital, but I managed with great difficulty to satisfy him—until this morning, when he wanted to sell me the boat. He wouldn't believe I hadn't the money, and I'm afraid I lost my patience with him."

"But good Lord!" I cried, "why should you put up with him at all? Your hands are clean."

He turned over those strong slender hands of his in the lamplight. "I had to keep him quiet. It was the only alternative I had to telling the truth."

"Is the truth so terrible, David?" I asked gently.

He laughed shortly, without humour. "The truth is not terrible at all. But it is more incredible than what Joxer would have you believe. Indeed there is more to it than that. It is essential for a purely selfish motive that nobody knows the truth until I've gone."

I straightened in my chair. "Don't be a fool, David! You're not going to run away?"

His eyes held mine for a moment. "I'm not going to *run* away, as you put it, but I hope to go away quite soon. As a matter of fact in about four days—sooner perhaps. That is why Joxer's time limit does not worry me unduly."

"But you can't go and leave things like this," I burst out. "If you go without explaining what happened the islanders, everybody will believe Joxer's story."

He shrugged his shoulders. "It doesn't make a great deal of difference, but I have done my best to prevent that. I've written down exactly what occurred on this island during the storm." He came to his feet and crossed to the dresser. I heard him open a drawer, and presently he

returned with two large envelopes. One was bulkier than the other, and he put this to one side before tossing the other on the centre of the table.

"You wouldn't think it would take so many pages to write the truth," he said.

Without touching it I saw that the envelope was sealed. I was still troubled.

"No matter what you have written here," I told him, "human nature being what it is you will be dubbed a murderer if you go away."

He ran his fingers through his hair. "As you said, my hands are clean. When I've gone, it will not worry me what people think."

"But damn it, man!" I cried, feeling a spark of anger for the first time, "you owe it to society and the authorities to explain how nine people died."

He spread his fingers on the table and looked at me steadily. "Verbally I've told them how Polly Cavanagh died, and that was the truth. As for the others—I have every reason to believe they are still alive."

CHAPTER TEN

FOR a moment I thought I must have misunderstood him.

"What did you say?"

"I told you that I have no reason to believe that Dan O'Leary and his friends are dead."

"But you told us they were—Mulcahy and me—that first day after the storm."

"I don't believe I ever told you they were dead. I told you I did not know. If they are dead I did not see them die. Polly Cavanagh died in this house, and I buried her. She is the only person I am sure of. For the others, I swear that at this moment I do not know whether they are dead or alive."

For a moment the possibility that my friend was deranged settled on my mind. I picked my words carefully.

"You must realize yourself that you are not making sense. They are not on the island or the mainland, but if you admit even the possibility of their being alive they must be somewhere."

He looked at me with a glazed stare, and while I wondered if he were listening to me at all, he tapped the sealed envelope with his finger.

"The whole story is there, only I don't want you to read it or publicise it in any way until you know I've gone. I will leave it for you here just as you see it."

I stared dazedly at the envelope.

"I must know something," I said.

He sat down suddenly and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I suppose the essence of it can be told to you," he said, "but you must give me your word of honour that, no matter how fantastic my story may sound to you, you will not repeat it to anybody until I have gone." As I hesitated, he continued: "At least give me as long as our friend McGrath. I won't hold you to your promise beyond that time limit."

I agreed at once, thankful that he had supplied a compromise between my conscience and my burning curiosity.

"Very well!" he began, locking his ringless fingers together. "First you will want to know something of myself. I have been a soldier most of my life, and according to the law of averages should be dead long ago. I have fought in many lands and for many causes, lost ones and otherwise. There is but one science I am proficient in, and that is warfare. The only explanation I can give for this is that I am the son of my father who owed allegiance to no country." He looked at me suddenly, a glint of amusement in his eyes. "You remember the day of our mackerel fishing? Well, you will understand the type my father was when I tell you that he thought he could defend single-handed all the small fry of the world. He died in Spain, little knowing that on this occasion he was just a test piece in a laboratory experiment on a new technique in mass destruction. But he had seen enough of wars and the futility of them to desire peace so vehemently that he felt he should do something about it. A few years before he was killed he had an idea of a formula for permanent world peace." He shrugged his shoulders slightly. "Others have had the same idea—it is not original—but he felt that his approach made it workable. I won't bore you

with the details." He reached his hand for the second envelope, and drew it to the centre of the table. "He charged me even as he died, to set it on paper and give it to the world. It is all here. For good or ill it is out of my system and his. When I've gone, you may offer it for publication. Many things have changed since my father first conceived this plan, but I still believe in it."

He paused for a moment to turn up the wick of the lamp again. "When I decided to fulfil this task my father had imposed upon me, I thought it would help if I lived in some desolate place where I would be unknown and uninterrupted. Fate brought me here, and until my dying day I will be grateful for that." He smiled suddenly. "All this is by way of introduction, and couldn't be of much interest to you under the circumstances. Still it sets the stage, as it were. 'Through you I got to know Polly Cavanagh, Dan O'Leary, and the others, and in the days of the storm we got to know each other as though we eleven people were the only humans in the world. From the first day of the gale it became apparent that they would have to evacuate the houses below. I have never seen such seas as were running those days, and never want to again. Eventually, as I told you before, we were all under this roof, and it was here in this old house of yours that we learned something of each other." His eyes wandered around the four walls of the kitchen. "Of Polly, her wisdom, her kindness and her courage, I could say a great deal, but since it is all written here I would only be wasting your time. Let it suffice to say that because of our common danger we who lived in this house were closer to each other than brothers and sisters."

My pipe had gone out, and I accepted one of his cigarettes.

"You have no idea what it was like being in this house during the storm," he continued. "It was as bad as could be imagined during the hours of daylight, but after dark

we felt that the wind would blow us clean off the cliffs to the rocks below, and incredible seas seemed to be breaking on the very roof. I never believed the legend about the vanishing island, but all the others, with the exception of Polly Cavanagh, were convinced that the prophecy was about to be fulfilled. But the morning always found us alive and still on the island. Then one day about the middle of the first week something unbelievable happened. It must have been about five or six o'clock in the evening, but it is hard to say—the flying spindrift and the rain made a perpetual twilight here—when we heard an unearthly whine, not unlike the whine of a huge speed dynamo. It was louder than the sounds of the storm, and every one of us heard it. I confess we were badly frightened, except Polly Cavanagh. I remember she propped herself up on the mattress—she was lying close to the fire, and she said : ‘There’s my dream out.’ We thought she was raving. We were still speculating as to what the sound could have been when somebody knocked at the back door.”

Cartwright drew deeply on his cigarette and exhaled the smoke in the air. “You have no idea of the effect of that knock. We were convinced—yes, even I, and I had not been in Ireland that long—that whatever stood beyond the door demanding entry was not human. None of us made a move to unbar the door, until Polly Cavanagh said to me : ‘Can you escape your destiny ? If you don’t open it, I will’ ; and she made an effort to get up. I somehow summoned enough courage to walk across the floor and unbar the door. Outside in the rain was Lanadora.”

I had followed his narrative with breathless interest, and my jaws must have been gaping, for at this juncture I brought my teeth together with a snap.

“Lanadora ;” I echoed.

Cartwright smiled. “That was her name.”

“What, or who is Lanadora ?” I asked.

“A girl,” said Cartwright.

I suspected he was joking, and under the circumstances I was shocked.

"For God's sake, Cartwright——"

"I swear it!"

"Where did she come from?"

"God knows!" said Cartwright. "I call her the girl from God-knows-where." He glanced at me. "You're not convinced, are you?"

"I'm still listening," I told him. "Where did the girl come from?"

Cartwright shrugged. "We asked ourselves the same question when she stood in the doorway, with the rain gleaming on her suit. She was dressed like a motor-cyclist, only the belted suit was all one piece and it was of a material I had never seen before. She wore a small woollen cap on her head and she took this off as she stepped inside. Her beauty was striking even then——"

I saw that he was evading my question, and I interrupted him.

"Where did she come from?"

"You could use the old cliché of dropping from the sky, and in this case you would be dead right." He jerked to his feet and began to pace the floor, casting a misshapen shadow on the wall every time he passed the lamp. He spoke rapidly: "I don't particularly care if you believe me—that will not alter the fact that it is undoubtedly true. This girl had literally dropped from the sky. She had in fact come here from another world in a circular craft and became our nearest neighbour for almost a week." He turned to look at me. "Can you imagine Mulcahy believing that—or anybody else?" He began pacing again. "I tell you I could easily believe it a hallucination myself but for the fact that the others are gone and that a few yards below the house there is a patch of scorched earth."

He came to the table and sat down again, fixing his burning eyes on me with a strange intensity. "When she

came to this house she was alone, but we knew later on that there were others with her, but we never saw them, for I don't believe they ever left their strange machine. In the time she spent with us we never learned if the landing here had been a necessity, but my personal belief is that something had gone wrong with the ship and it had to land to be put right. It was their good luck and ours that they landed here and not in the Sound."

While he had been speaking, my mind had fastened on the patch of scorched heather that Mulcahy and I had noticed when we first visited the island after the storm. I began to think that Cartwright was not mad after all.

"What sort of a person was she?" I asked him.

Cartwright's eyes moved away from me and lost their focus.

"There is a spark of divinity in all of us. Sometimes that is difficult to believe, for we are capable of any evil, but in her that spark was so apparent that she seemed to radiate light. She was the loveliest creature I have ever seen." His voice had sunk lower and he was speaking as though to himself. "She was incredibly intelligent, so much so that she overcame the language barrier simply by reading our thoughts, although she learnt, without apparent effort, sufficient English to make herself understood and to understand us. She shared the happiness of our little community and seemed, after a short time, to become a part of it. She understood our fears, too, and was alive to the dangers that threatened us. Her ship was ready to leave on the worst night of the storm--a night of such terror that I came very close to believing the legend. As it was, Dan O'Leary and the others were convinced that the world was doomed. That was why Lanadora offered to take them away. But I doubt if that was the only reason they accepted. I think they would have gone in any case."

He stopped speaking, but his eyes still held their sightless stare.

"Why didn't you go?" I asked him.

It took about half-a-minute for my words to register.

"Polly Cavanagh was dying at the time, but I don't think that alone would have kept me here. I felt I had to finish what I started." He touched the bulkier envelope with his fingers. "It may be just rubbish, but it may be important. Only time will discover."

He lit another cigarette. "So Polly and I remained, and the others went away to a new life. I didn't even see them go—I was with Polly when they left the island—but a red streak of fire seemed to fill the world when the craft took off, and I remember feeling afraid and very lonely."

He was silent for a long while after this, and I was mute with the wonder of his story. I was remembering, too, the night I had seen what I thought was red lightning over the island. At length Cartwright looked at me.

"I don't expect you to believe a word of what I've told you."

"A few things tie up with your story," I said. "The patch of scorched earth and the red lightning."

Cartwright's face brightened. "I had forgotten you saw that."

"Yes!" I said, "and so did Jimmy John." An inner excitement was making me want to pace the floor like my tenant. My eyes had fastened on the calendar on the table. I looked at my bearded friend.

"When you speak of going away, where do you intend to go?"

Cartwright watched me guardedly. "I am simply going away."

I would not be put off. "Did Lanadora promise to come back for you?"

He hesitated a moment, and his glance rested fleetingly on the calendar.

"In four days, you said," I cried excitedly.

Cartwright came to his feet.

“ I’ll see you to the pier.”

His face had become set, and I knew him well enough to realize that questioning him further would be a waste of breath. I fingered the envelopes as I stood up.

“ When you come again,” said Cartwright, “ say, in about a week—or maybe when you have to—these will be on the table addressed to you.”

I had to be satisfied with that.

As we walked towards the pier in the darkness I remembered his ringless finger. I asked him what happened to his signet ring.

“ I gave it to somebody,” he said cryptically.

I did not ask him to whom.

I reached the mainland sometime after one o’clock, but I didn’t sleep at all that night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MORNING brought a stiff southwester and torrential slanting rain. I had intended to do some work at my desk, but my mind was filled with Cartwright's story and there was no room in it for anything else. I moped around the house until about ten o'clock, and then, on impulse, I decided to go down to the village. I was reaching for my oilskins when Jimmy John lifted the latch and came in.

The old man's clothes were rain-sodden, although a coarse sack he had fastened about his shoulders had saved him somewhat, and his trousers clung to his match-stick legs. A light-grey sports jacket I had once seen on Cartwright looked incongruous on his stooped back, and a battered hat looked as though it were pressed down low on his forehead by the very weight of the rainwater which had collected in the hollow crown. His white beard was scraggy and no whiter than the face it enclosed. The gnarled blue-veined hands were trembling.

"God Almighty, Jimmy!" I swore, "are you looking for your end, wandering around on a morning like this?" I unfastened the sack around his shoulders and stripped off his jacket. Except for the top of the collar the shirt was dry. "Wouldn't you think that your long years would give you a scrap of sense—and you with chronic rheumatism."

"'Tisn't the rheumatism I have to worry me this morning," he said tonelessly, blinking his red-rimmed eyes at the fire.

"Well, whatever the reason for your madness," I said crossly, "get out of those trousers before you get pneumonia."

I did not speak again until I had stripped him of everything except his shirt and dressed him in an old suit of mine. Then I gave him a blanket over his shoulders and a glass of whiskey in his fist and set him down to the fire. The pallor of his face was frightening.

"Was it sleep-walking you were this morning?" I asked him sarcastically, although I did not doubt that nothing but a very serious matter would have brought him out in such weather.

He looked at me across the fire. He seemed unutterably tired, although the fire and the spirit were putting the colour in his face again. "Don't go on to me any more, Cathal," he pleaded as a child would.

His appeal touched me to the heart.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy. It is only yourself I am worried about."

He fastened a claw-like hand on my knee, the tendons standing out like taut wires under the white skin.

"Ye don't have to tell me that. But ye have more than me to worry about this time. The divil is abroad."

I looked at him sharply, and his sunken eyes held my own.

"I should know about the divil bein' abroad, since not an hour ago I left him." He stared into the fire. "I saw Dan O'Leary's boat."

The implication of this robbed me of speech. I wondered how many others knew of the boat.

"From what I hear, the fact that Dan's boat is where it is will come as no surprise to ye. The divil told me ye knew about it." The glass he was holding trembled with a slight ague that shook his body.

"Yes, Jimmy. I know about the boat since yesterday. How many more besides yourself know of it now? I suppose McGrath has told the parish?"

Jimmy brought his shaking glass to his mouth and dried his whiskers with the back of his hand. "He's not mad enough for that yet. But there is evil fermenting in him, and hate. And when a body has filled up with the two of them there's no tellin' what destruction they'll do."

"How did you come to learn about this, Jimmy?"

He did not take his gaze from the fire. "'Tis a terrible thing to be gettin' old. When ye feel the power goin' out of yer legs and yer hands, and when a mile of the road begins to look like the other end of the world. But people are wrong if they think the mind weakens, too. Spryer it gets, man!—and wiser. That is why I know why the divil told me and you and nobody else. 'Twas because he knew we would not betray those we love and that we would take a friend's trouble on our shoulder as if it was our own." He sipped his whiskey again and set the glass on the floor between his legs. "He was mad drunk in Clancy's last night, but it wasn't there he got the drink. He came in lookin' for ye and to shower us with curses, with the Holy Name on his lips at every word. When he found ye weren't there, he goes off hardly able to stand, and we glad to see the last of him.

"This morning I met him again. I always try to make eight o'clock Mass, and as I came out of my home wasn't McGrath waiting for me, with his eyes like two red coals, and the stamp of the divil on him.

"'There's somethin' I want to show ye,' says he, and takes me by the arm to his house, where he showed me poor Dan's boat. Then he told me how Mr. Cartwright had murdered every livin' soul on the island and that he told lies when he said they were drowned tryin' to make the mainland. He told me then that ye knew about the boat and a bargain he made with ye. He gave me a message

for ye. He told me to say that he wasn't goin' to wait the full week, and that if half the money wasn't in his fist by to-morrow at twelve o'clock he was goin' to tell the Sergeant about the boat."

Jimmy looked at me then, his red-rimmed eyes moist.

"I don't understand about the boat—and the bargain is yer own business."

It was strange that knowing the nature of McGrath I had not suspected that he would not keep faith with us. Now that he had proved his perfidy I realized that we should have anticipated it. The fact that old Jimmy knew of the existence of Dan O'Leary's boat further complicated matters, but knowing the affection he had for Cartwright I knew he could be trusted.

"It's Dan O'Leary's boat McGrath has down there, Jimmy," I said. "But Joxer is wrong about Cartwright murdering them all."

Jimmy jerked up his head to glare at me. "D'ye feel ye have to convince me of that? Man alive, have sense! D'ye think after eighty-odd years on this callous earth I can't tell a murderer from a bishop? There's much I don't understand, but wan thing I do know, and that is that my friend out there wouldn't harm a fly. Now, if 'twas bold Joxer ye was talking about, I believe his murderous nature would do for the lot of them."

"All right, so," I said. "But what I'm going to tell you will sound incredible—but I believe it to be true."

"There are quare things in the world," said Jimmy, which did not help me at all.

"Would it seem strange to you to learn that there are people on some of the stars in the sky, Jimmy?"

His eyes probed mine for a moment. Then:

"'Tis a thing I often thought of. I could show you ten men in this townland who believe that little men live under the ground and do all sort of depredation. Would that be any stranger than what ye had to tell me?"

"No stranger than that, Jimmy." And then I told him everything I had learned from Cartwright. He listened to me without a word, but occasionally he bent down and lifted his whiskey from the floor to take a sip of it. The end of my story coincided with the last of the spirit. Very solemnly he placed his empty glass on the mantelpiece.

"'Tis a wondrous story," he said, at last, "and 'tis easier to believe than red lightning, for there's nothin' natural about that." He mused for a moment, staring unwinking at the fire. The colour was back in his face and his voice was suddenly warm and strong. "Glory be to God, Cathal, it does me heart good to know that Danno and Frankie and the rest are not with the cold clay. Wherever they're gone, Katie Farrington will be boilin' spuds for a new husband." He chuckled to himself.

"However you see it," I reminded him, "our friend Cartwright might well be in trouble before long."

"Not if the weather holds like this," said Jimmy. "The sea is beginnin' to boil, man—and by the same token McGrath is not the only wan that can use his head." He placed his hand on my knee again. "I'm glad I came to ye this mornin', Cathal. Y've given me new heart. I'll go down now. I think the rain is after easin' off a bit."

I gave him a half-glass more for the road, and he left then. I watched him shuffle down the hill, almost smothered in a spare oilskin of mine. His visit had lifted me out of my despondency. And for once I was glad of the wind and the rain that made the Sound a dangerous highway. If the bad weather lasted, we had nothing to fear from McGrath.

But the storm did not hold. Before three o'clock the rain had stopped, and an hour later the sun came out with all the promise of a hot day. Already the sea was smoothening itself out. Before tea-time I could have crossed to the island without shipping a cup of water aboard.

About eight o'clock I went down to the village, and stopped in at the Post Office for tobacco. Miss O'Dea was just closing up for the night, and gave me the news of the day as she tidied things up inside her cage. With my mind full of graver things I was only half-listening to her until she told me of Jimmy John's purchase.

"What did you say?" I asked sharply, a faint echo of what she had said in my head.

"I told him I couldn't give him any more, because there was five gallons for Mr. Cartwright, and he'd be calling for them before the week was out."

"Was it paraffin you said he bought?"

She looked at me with a flash of impatience.

"Amn't I after telling you! He wanted two gallons of it."

"What would he be wanting with two gallons," I wondered aloud, "and the days getting longer?"

"The very thing I asked him—him that never bought more than a pint at a time."

A faint tinkle of alarm was beginning to sound in my brain.

"What did he say?"

"He said he'd be in to buy an oil stove from me next week, but that he wanted to make sure of the oil first."

"You didn't give him two gallons?"

"No, indeed! I gave him what I could spare—about six pints. He took it away in a petrol tin."

Six pints could be enough, I thought.

"He must be doting in his old age," said Miss O'Dea. "Where would he get the money for an oil stove?"

"Jimmy is getting very old," I said. "I suppose that's it."

"I like your 'getting'," said Miss O'Dea. "If you see him and he wants to bring the oil back to-morrow when he gets his senses back, I'll take it from him. You can tell him that."

"I will," I told her, as I went out on the road.

I went straight to Jimmy's home just outside the village on the road to Dunfoy. He was not there, and the front door was open. Although I searched for the oil I could not find any, nor was the smell of it in the house. From there I went to Clancy's. A few men were wetting their elbows on the bar, but the chair beside the fire was without an occupant.

"Did you see Jimmy John," I asked Clancy casually, as if I was making conversation.

"Divil a sign of him," said Clancy, looking over his shoulder at the clock. "He's later than usual to-night." He polished the bar in front of me. "What will you have?"

I ordered a drink, and drank it without haste, being drawn now and again into the flow of the general conversation, nor did I mention Jimmy's name again. My glass was almost empty when the door was thrown open, and Dan Coffey, the postman, stood in the centre of the floor with round eyes popping from his head and words shouldering each other from his mouth. The very sight of him confirmed my fears, and I did not have to wait for his first coherent splutter:

"Joxer's place is on fire!"

Instinctively I joined the rush for the door.

When we reached McGrath's place there was little enough we could do. The boathouse was a blazing inferno, but the cottage was intact, and we concentrated on ensuring that it remained that way. Lots of people had brought buckets, and we wetted down the thatch with sea water and beat out the minor fires that started in the underbrush. The leaves of the overhanging foliage crackled and snapped all around us, but the sap in the green timber and the morning rain confined the flames to the immediate area of the boathouse. The danger was of sparks touching off the thatched roof of the house, and we watched them carefully when they detached themselves from the flames and shot

like meteorites towards the house. In one hour the fire had burned itself out, but by then all that was left of the boathouse was a mound of ashes that glowed fitfully when the breeze took it. We threw water on it until it became as black as the night.

All this time there was no sign of McGrath, and somebody said he was back in Dunfoy. With his house intact, few had any sympathy for how he would feel on his return. My own feelings on the matter were hard to describe accurately. I had not the slightest doubt that Jimmy John had touched off the boathouse, and because he could easily be associated with the affair I feared for him. On the other hand I was jubilant that Dan O'Leary's boat had been destroyed. Without this evidence McGrath's story would be beyond belief.

We were all in very good humour as we returned to the village. No really serious damage had been done, and the hour's work had been stimulating. Most of us had developed a rare thirst.

I was the first into Clancy's pub, and I pulled up so sharply at the door that the others formed a tight knot behind me.

Sitting beside the fire, a drink in hand, was Joxer McGrath.

He leered at me over his glass. "I passed ye a half-hour ago and ye batin' out the flames. Ye must think I'm an awful bastern fool. Did ye think I'd have the boat there under yer hands at this eleventh hour? Did ye think I'd chance you or that old nanny goat bestin' me? Ye dared too much to-night, me bucko, and by the living God, I can tell you now that solid gold wouldn't buy what I offered ye. 'Tis vengeance I want now, not money. Me bould Jimmy will remember this night and the lesson I gave him."

In three strides I was beside him, and gripping him by the lapels of his coat, jerked him to his feet.

“Where’s Jimmy John?”

His eyes were wide and his breath was foul. In the depths of the pale pupils I discerned a shadow of fear. I tightened my grip, drawing the lapels of his coat across his throat. A great vein swelled and pulsed in the centre of his forehead.

“He’s up in his house,” he said thickly.

“I am going up to see,” I told him. “If you’ve harmed him I’ll be back.” I let him go then, and he fell backwards on the edge of the chair and slid on to the floor.

I heard him curse me as I brushed through the amazed onlookers.

I found Jimmy John’s house in darkness, but heavy breathing from the inner room brought me to the old man’s side. I lit the lamp and held it over the bed. He lay there fully dressed. There was a patch of blood on the pallid face, and the eye above it was swollen and already blue. He turned his face to the light and smiled weakly when he saw me.

“I met the divil again, Cathal.”

“A bad night’s work, Jimmy,” I told him, a cold anger settling on me. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“There’s nothing much wrong with me,” he said. “He only hit me once or twice. ‘T won’t kill me whatever. A small price to pay when the boat is burnt.”

“I don’t think the boat was there, Jimmy,” I said. “I think you got your clouts for nothing.”

The old man groaned as if I had struck him, and sat up.

“There’s little we can do now, Jimmy, but one thing I must do before this night is down, and that’s to tear Joxer apart.”

“Don’t be causin’ any more trouble, Cathal,” he said, weakly. “I should have known he’d have the divil’s cunning.”

I bathed his eye, and was relieved to find that the blood on his cheek was only from a skinned cheek bone. He

suffered me to do this in stunned silence. I made a cup of tea for him and gave it to him very sweet. I had read somewhere that this was good for shock, although he did not look in bad shape now.

"I'll be up again, Jimmy," I said then. "I promised Joxer I'd come back."

"Don't make any more trouble, Cathal," he pleaded, as I went out.

The hum of conversation died immediately when I opened the door of Clancy's. Men looked at me strangely, their drinks arrested half-way to their mouths. The chair beside the fire was empty.

"Where's Joxer?" I wanted to know, advancing into the room.

They looked uncertainly at each other, and Clancy, white-faced, leaned over the bar.

"He left a short time after you."

"Never mind!" I said. "I'll find him." I turned to the door and went out into the night. On the step I met Sergeant Mulcahy. He gripped me firmly by the elbow, but his voice was friendly.

"The fine hurry you're in, Cathal."

"I'm looking for Joxer," I said.

"He's not so far away," said Mulcahy, softly. "I've just been talking to him."

All the fight went out of me, to be replaced by a sense of hopelessness.

"What do you want?" I asked him.

"I thought you might come and smoke a pipe with me down in the barracks."

I lifted my shoulder and he released my arm.

We walked side by side along the dark road.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE smoke spiralling lazily from Mulcahy's pipe reached upwards to diffuse in the haze which he, Seán Malone, and myself had made in the warm barrack room. I watched the thoughtful hatchet face of the Sergeant with anxiety. The knotted muscles on his lean jaws flexed and relaxed as he clamped now and again on the stem of his pipe, but his gaze was fixed on the fire. He had remained like that through most of my story, leaning backwards from the edge of the chair, and his long legs sprawling towards the grate, so that the long length of him was almost a straight line. For the past two hours Seán kept the fire going. I had not seen McGrath at all.

I had emptied myself in those two hours, and now that I had told everything I knew I felt that an intolerable burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I could—and would—have lied to some men, but never to this lean official who had been part of my life for so long. Nor did I fear any more for either Cartwright or Jimmy John. I knew instinctively that their fate was in the strictly impartial hands of a man I knew to be honourable. My anxiety sprang from the fact that I had not been strictly honest in not telling him my story before.

The hands of the big clock moved on to the hour as we three men sat there, and the sudden whirring of the

mechanism was immediately smothered in a single solemn stroke. Mulcahy looked idly at the yellowed face of it.

"It's later than I thought," he remarked, as though his mind had already left the subject of my talk, but I knew that even now he was trying to weave a pattern from the poor threads of the story. He leaned forward, drawing his legs under the chair, and rested his elbows on his knees.

"I wonder what the Super would say to that!" he said to nobody in particular.

Seán smiled wryly: "He'd say it was a case for the navy again." Seán had kept his thoughts to himself all night.

The Sergeant smiled a little tightly at his subordinate's remark. Then he looked at me, turning his head sideways and upwards. "Only I know you so well I'd say you were either drunk or wandering in your mind. As it is, I'll have to take you seriously."

"I warned you it would be difficult to believe," I reminded him.

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "I didn't say I believed it, but I believe that you are telling me what you believe to be true. That's rather involved, but you know what I mean. At least you have borne out McGrath's story about Dan O'Leary's boat." He rubbed his hand on his chin. "Joxer's theory is more plausible than your tale."

I experienced a sudden emptiness in the pit of the stomach.

"You mean about Cartwright killing off the lot?"

He nodded his head.

"But Good God, you know Cartwright as well as I do! The man just isn't capable of doing such a thing."

"I don't know," said Mulcahy, doubtfully. "About twenty years ago, before I came here, I was stationed in Rathcar, way up in Connemara. It wasn't a bad place to be, considering everything—far enough away from Galway City to be comfortable for an official, and all the fishing and shooting you could wish for. Plenty of fun, too, at

private hoolies—and I was young enough to enjoy them then. There was a very nice family living there in a house that would be considered big anywhere, but in Connemara was a veritable mansion. Their name was de Foubert. The old boy was French, and wealthy, and the greatest benefactor I had ever met. I swear he supported a round dozen impoverished families in the village. His wife, who was Irish, wasn't half as nice as her husband, but she seemed a nice lady for all that. They had two boys who hated Connemara, and lost no time in getting out of it, but the old boy loved the country, and on most fine days you'd find him with his easel and stool daubing away on a piece of canvas. His pictures looked like the very devil, but he thought they were great, and he was so nice that nobody had the heart to tell him they were no good. Come to think of it, in these modern days they might have been considered great works of art, but to us at that time, since they didn't even remotely resemble the things they were supposed to be, we thought they were just punk. But they kept him happy, and that was the main thing. I became very friendly with him, and we often went fishing and shooting together. You never met such a pleasant associate, and his wife made up some very good lunch baskets.

"One day he sent me a message to come up to the house, and I went there straight away. He met me in the hall, and I could see he was very indignant about something. There was a lot of blood on his shirt. He showed me into his study where his wife lay on the floor with her head battered in, but completely ignoring the corpse, he picked up one of his atrocious paintings from the table and held it up for my inspection.

'What do you think of that?' he asked.

"I didn't even know what it was. I said it was excellent. 'You ought to hear what that stupid woman said about it,' he said."

"Ever since," concluded Mulcahy, "I never claim to know any man."

The story clearly indicated that in the Sergeant's opinion McGrath's theory was not unlikely.

"But there were factors in Cartwright's story that are inescapable. You must remember no bodies were found. Then there is that patch of scorched earth and that red light that Jimmy John and I saw."

Mulcahy got up and stretched himself.

"I haven't forgotten," he said, through a yawn. "Nor have I forgotten that you were the first to mention red lightning to Cartwright. Anyway, it's too late to do anything about it to-night. I suggest we all get a few hours' sleep and start for the island at, say, six o'clock." He looked at me quizzically. "Do you think you will be able to run us over then?"

I nodded dumbly, and went out. Seán bolted the door behind me.

"Don't worry, Cathal," he whispered. "Everything will work out all right." He did not sound very hopeful.

Back at home I sat before the fire in deep depression. My interview with Mulcahy had shaken my faith in my own judgment. As I sat there I was a prey to all sorts of gruesome suggestions regarding Cartwright. Towards dawn I dozed long enough to dream of the islander. I thought I saw him on the highest point of the island, a stooped figure eerily silhouetted against a flaming crimson sky. He was shovelling the soil frantically, piling it up on one side. It seemed to me that I stood at his shoulder watching him, but he gave no sign that he was aware of my presence, so intent was he on his work. Catching the reflection of the translucent sky, the perspiration gleamed darkly on his forehead, and when occasionally he paused to draw a hand across his brow, there seemed to be blood on it when he took it away.

The hole deepened and widened until he was working waist deep inside in it. He began to use his spade with great caution now, and suddenly, when he came on something that was no longer soil, he abandoned the tool altogether, and grovelling on his knees began to scoop the earth away with frenzied fingers, until the shrouded shape of something that looked human was revealed. I leaned over the grave as he plucked at the material that covered the body. My heart constricted as I nerved myself to behold the decomposed face of Polly Cavanagh. It seemed then that my shadow fell across the grave, for Cartwright, who had uncovered the corpse's face, looked wildly up at me with eyes like glowing coals. Quickly he covered the face with the shroud, but I had already seen and recognized it. It was the face of Dan O'Leary gleaming white and incorrupt in the crimson twilight. Now on the countenance of my tenant I saw gather a fury that contorted features and dilated veins. I backed away from the grave as he climbed out and advanced towards me. 'Then I heard the sound of the sea below and knew that I stood on the cliff edge. Cartwright moved up to me and grabbed me by the shoulder. I felt his fingers bite into my flesh and he began to shake me to and fro.

"Forget what you saw," he kept repeating as I swayed on the cliff edge.

I awoke to find myself bathed in perspiration, and Mulcahy shaking me gently by the shoulder.

With the terror of my dream still upon me it took me a few seconds to realize where I was.

"You should have gone to bed, Cathal," said Mulcahy.

The fire was out and I was cold. "I was dreaming," I told him.

"I know," he said. "Whatever it was I'm glad you dreamt it, and not me."

The early morning light was grey against the window.

Seán Malone and Joxer McGrath were waiting for us at the pier. The young civic guard was tightly buttoned in his greatcoat, and the boatmaker had a scarf knotted around his throat. He avoided my eyes, and when we stepped into the boat he isolated himself in the bows. Seán and Mulcahy sat amidships, with their backs to him.

A cold mist clung to the sea and veiled the island beyond. It was raw on the throat, and whirled past us like eddying smoke, to close behind the boat, gradually blotting out the mainland as if it were stealing our vision. Half-way across, I raised the dark outline of the island and altered my course a point or two. As I came into the pier a gull, startled by the boat, screamed in terror as it wheeled away from us. I thought of my dream as I glided alongside Cartwright's boat.

The light was stronger now, and as we climbed towards the house a breeze was beginning to disperse the mist. Joxer padded behind us almost forgotten.

Unconsciously I moved a little ahead as we neared the house, and was first to the door. I looked uncertainly at Mulcahy. The mist had made little beads of moisture on his eyebrows and his face was pale. He reached a hand for the latch and lifted it noiselessly. The door, swinging away of its own weight, creaked a little.

"Where did he sleep?" asked Mulcahy.

"Upstairs." I looked up the dark stairway, feeling a Judas.

Mulcahy went up the stairs, making no attempt to tread softly. The rest of us went into the kitchen.

I saw the signet ring at once. It rested on top of two bulky envelopes in the centre of the table as if it had been deliberately placed there. . . . "I gave it to somebody," Cartwright had said, and now it was back, a mute witness understood by myself alone. Seán picked up the ring idly and laid it aside to examine the envelopes. I could see clearly that both of them were addressed to me and marked

‘ Confidential ’. As I stood there, my whole body warmed by an inner glow, I heard Mulcahy come down the stairs. He looked in at us, and caught my eye.

“ He’s not upstairs.”

“ No ! ” I said. “ He is not.”

I looked at Joxer and smiled at him.

He stared at me in amazement. I thought that he would not look so bad if he that yellow dog tooth extracted.

Part Two

CARTWRIGHT'S MANUSCRIPT

§ 1

It was strange that a chance meeting with an acquaintance of mine on the cross-Channel steamer to Dublin should have ultimately led me to Innishios, and stranger still that feeling I experienced when I first looked on the island from Cathal O'Riain's boat. It seemed to me then that not only had I seen the wedge of green before, but that I was coming home after many footsore miles of aimless wandering, sure of a heartening welcome. Yet all the time I knew that I had never been to Ireland in my life. The sensation was eerie, and shrouded my first impressions with a mist of unreality, for since I knew my senses played me false, I invested all people and all things with the same improbability, like a dreamer who knows he is but dreaming. Later I was to learn of the terrible hypnotic charm of this land of moods and mists, where the twilight breaks your heart with its utter loneliness, and the morning lifts from the hills with a heavy reluctance. I have met a great many Irishmen, good and bad, all over the world, but none like the Irish I have met at home; men and women who needed small excuse for laughter, and smaller still for tears, a people who lived neither in

the past or the present, but stood, as it were, forever on the threshold of Eternity. In all my years abroad I have never known a people more conscious of the transitory nature of life, and I have often thought since I came here that nothing should matter very much to a people who considered that to die was to be "better off".

I felt on that first day that I was one of them and I believe that still, if not by blood then by adoption, for events have bound me so closely to the fate of ten Irish people who made up the population of the island that to consider myself a race apart from them would be unthinkable. And then, of course, I may indeed have Irish blood. My father, who acknowledged no nation as his own, was born in England. I never knew my mother. When or how she died or where she brought me into the world I never learned, and these things were of little consequence to me until recently. Now I like to think that my mother was Irish. In fact I have convinced myself of this. It would explain to a degree at least the response of my heart when Cathal O'Riain put me ashore on the island for the first time.

I have but a vague recollection of my introduction to the inhabitants of the island. Fragmentary pictures were all my mind retained that day. I was vaguely uneasy, sensing that however good-natured their intentions, these people meant to intrude on my privacy, and just then, more than anything else in the world, I wanted to set my book on paper.

About this I may say little now, since it is finished, and I have little doubt that it will just be one more book on world government added to the many that have emerged from time to time. I am not satisfied with it and feel that I should rewrite, but there is not time now. I have made the fundamental mistake of entrusting the destiny of nations into the hands of men alone. I have proposed a plan in which I have contrived to make all men join hands, but

I neglected to make one of them put his hand into those of God to ensure the perfect unity.

The really strange thing about the work was the relentless sense of urgency that beset me to put it down on paper. It was as though I knew beforehand that I had but a limited time at my disposal, and that all too short. During these first days on the island I never was more conscious of the fleeting seconds. As I sat at my table it seemed that I could see the malicious war machine assemble and gear itself for yet another conflict while the formula for perfect peace (as I thought) was still locked in my mind. And how securely locked it was! I do not know how many times I tried to disentangle my thoughts and write them down coherently. I pounded my typewriter for hours, only to find that I produced nothing that was helpful, and yet in my mind I could see the whole plan as clearly as through limpid water. I felt like a seer or a visionary who had had his tongue plucked out. During these first days I was very far from practising what I proposed to preach. To Katie Farrington must go the laurels for patience and forbearance. I found her persistence in being a good housekeeper maddening. I got up at dawn in order to avoid her inquisitive broom. She forced meals on me when I wasn't hungry. In her passion for order she reshuffled my papers and on occasions swept some important notes into the fire. She tramped up the stairs and along the corridor like an army in column of route, and slammed the doors as if they were never to open again. In my highly-strung state of nerves it seemed that she swept the floors upstairs with a garden rake. I remember seething at the table while she worked overhead. In my mind I saw myself going to the foot of the stairs and yelling at her to stop making noise. But I never did that in practice. I suspected that she had an acid tongue, and I was a little afraid of her. Only once did I lose control. One of her most maddening characteristics was the humming accompaniment she maintained while she

worked. It sounded like a berserk bee loose in the house, and I have rarely heard a more infuriating sound.

"For God's sake!" I implored her one day. "Stop that noise!"

She was working at the hearth when I made my impassioned appeal, but she did not even look at me.

"What noise?"

"That infernal humming. Burst into song if you want, but spare me the droning."

She departed upstairs, taking her brush with her, and for a full hour the house resounded to the slamming of doors, interspaced by the harsh metallic scraping of floors being swept, and high above all this, the incomprehensible words of a wild Gaelic lament that was calculated to drive men insane.

When she finally reverted to her humming later on, I endured it in silence.

Once, too, I spoke to her about interfering with my papers on the table. Burning peat in a house creates a deposit of fine white dust on everything, and I had no objection to her dusting off the table on occasions. However, it seemed to me that she always picked a moment when I was working at it. Grudgingly I would lean back to make room for her duster, and wait with an exaggerated air of resignation until she had finished. Then came a day when I went outside for a turn around the house. When I returned, the table and typewriter had all received attention. Not a particle of dust remained on anything, but all my papers were stacked into one neat pile. The crumpled sheets on the floor had disappeared, together with several scraps of paper on which I had scribbled invaluable notes. I couldn't find anything. I nearly went crazy. I heard her moving around upstairs, and I went out into the hall to roar up at her. She took her time to respond. Finally, when I had decided to run up and bring her forcibly downstairs, she appeared on the landing.

She seemed taller from this angle, and invested with an unusual dignity. She surveyed me with a calm scrutiny.

"Well, Mr. Cartwright?" she said. "You called?"

"I roared," I told her savagely. "What in Heaven's name have you done to the table?"

She descended the steps slowly, her fingers barely touching the bannisters, her fine body erect, while I waited for her, quivering with rage. When she reached the hall her gaze was level with mine, a fact I had not noticed before. The dark pupils of her Spanish eyes held a quiet tranquillity.

"Little credit your roaring does you, Mr. Cartwright," she said, "and I'm not one that's accustomed to it. My first husband—God rest his soul—had the same habit. He used to go over to Clancy's every now and again and come home roaring loud enough to be heard in Dunfoy. 'I was very disagreeable. One night he bumped his head against an iron saucepan I held in my hand, and from that day he was the quietest and soberest man in Ireland.'" She sighed, and regarded me with wide questioning eyes. "Wasn't that strange?"

"I'm not interested in your husbands, Mrs. Farrington," I told her, somewhat calmer. "I'm telling you not to interfere with the papers on my table again, however untidy they seem to you."

Her face lightened and she threw up her hand in a gesture of delight that was as Latin as her eyes.

"'Tis remarkable how I can understand you when you don't shout. If that's what you want that's the way it will be. You only have to say so."

"I've said so," I told her.

"Then you should have said so sooner," she remarked, unperturbed.

I felt I had dared enough with a woman who had virtually confessed to hitting her husband over the head with a saucepan, but I could not let her have the last word.

"Your second husband must have been a brave man, Mrs. Farrington."

A little colour crept into her smooth cheeks, but she was not angry.

"Brave he was then, Mr. Cartwright, and very brave. Some there are who might tell you that if he could see me he wouldn't have married me, but I was his eyes for ten years and he was content enough. The poor quiet creature was like a child in many ways, but he was a brave man when his eyesight was taken from him, and he died bravely, too."

I looked at her steadily while the import of her words sank into my mind, assuaging everything except the monstrous thing I had said to her.

"Please forgive me, Mrs. Farrington," I said, at last. "Hurting people seems to be the only thing I am good at. I'm a very cross-grained man."

Her face was alive in a moment, and she almost pushed me into the kitchen.

"You're no such thing. You're a very tired boy." She pressed me into a chair. "I'm going to make you a cup of tea. Too much work you're doing altogether."

And so we had tea. We never quarrelled again, and that evening Cathal O'Riain took me fishing.

§ 2

THE storm began on the evening Cathal O'Riain and I returned from our mackerel fishing. Up to then the weather had been fine, but even as we stood on the pier I could see more ominous signs of the worsening weather in the faces of the islanders who had come down to meet us than in the freshening wind and lowering skies. These people

who virtually lived on the breast of the sea had an inborn instinct about the elements. They sensed rather than saw all the signs and portents.

"That's the last we'll be seeing of Cathal for a while," remarked Dan O'Leary, as my friend's boat was swallowed by the night.

Frankie Casey, who stood beside us, the wind tugging at his unbuttoned waistcoat, looked up at the sky before removing his pipe and spitting carefully to leeward.

"About a week I'd say, by the looks of things. As it is, his work will be cut out for him to get ashore to-night. I never remember me joints painin' the way they did all day, not since the night Davy Farrington came home with his eyeballs frozen in his head. Whatever 'tis goin' to do to-night, it'll be bad, and it'll last a few days."

"Or maybe more," said Dan.

I offered no comment. The only tempests I knew of were of human passion, of hate and greed and lust, but nothing at all of the natural storms. However, Polly Cavanagh, who was with us, touched Casey by the elbow. A few wisps of grey hair had escaped from beneath her shawl and the wind was blowing them across her forehead. In the deepening darkness her face was but a vague grey outline.

"A week, you say, Frankie Casey? A week, and many a long week I'm telling you, and only one of all of us to see the end of it. 'Tis the beginning of my dream. You think you have seen bad storms in your day, but you'll never see the likes of this."

Her voice was even and unemotional, like a person speaking out of a trance or a dream. I felt the short hairs bristle on the nape of my neck, and saw Dan and Frankie exchange a glance.

"We'll wait what's to come, Polly," said Dan, "and whatever 'tis, God's will be done. Sure we can only do our best."

"Amen to that, Dan O'Leary," said Polly, as she shuffled off into the darkness, leaving we three men alone.

Casey gripped me by the arm. "Don't take much notice of Polly, Mr. Cartwright, she'd put the heart across her own mother. She has the second sight."

"I thing she's right about the storm," I said, although I could not have known one way or the other. I felt very cold.

Dan O'Leary put a string of mackerel into my hand. "I hope that's all Polly's right about. Take a few mackerel up with ye. They're nice when they're fresh." He paused a moment, then: "I don't like the thought of you up there in that lonely house by yourself. You can bide down here with us for a day or two."

I nearly panicked at the suggestion of being separated from my work as well as being robbed of my privacy. I stammered about being used to being alone.

"As you wish," were Dan's last words to me that night. "But if you change your mind at any time just come down and lift the latch."

There were no locks on the island.

The wind was whipping itself into a gale as I climbed the hill, and the rain was beginning when I reached the house. There was a light under the kitchen door, and my heart warmed towards Katie Farrington.

I was lonely after all in this house.

She looked around from the stove when I came in. "Well, glory be to God!" she said. "Look at the white face of you. Come in to the fire before you get your end. I'll have the kettle boiled in a minute." She took the fish from me and ran her hand over my shoulders. "Have you any sense at all, boy? Get out of that wet sweater."

It was pleasant to be bullied by her, particularly when the warm kitchen was filled with the smell of home-baked bread, and the fat was crackling in the pan.

"It's beginning to rain, Mrs. Farrington," I told her, as I peeled off. "I think you had better get down home before it gets worse."

She draped the sweater over the back of a chair. "And who'd fry the mackerel?" she wanted to know. "And me with nothing to eat since midday. Besides, it will blow over."

"There is an old lady and two hardy men down there who wouldn't agree with you."

She looked at me sharply. "Did Polly Cavanagh say that?"

"She said it would last a week and many a long week, and only one would see the end of it."

Katie straightened, her face thoughtful.

"And what did the two hardy men say?"

"There doesn't seem to be any doubt about it, we're in for a hell of a storm. That's a unanimous verdict."

"I put great *meas* on the saying of Polly," Katie said. "'Tis rarely indeed she's known to be wrong."

As we shared the mackerel I learned much more about Polly Cavanagh.

Nobody knew her age with any certainty, but Jimmy John, an old man on the mainland remembered her as a tall, beautiful girl when he was a boy. She had become the heroine of a thousand legends and had been invested with the wisdom of Solomon. Yet her life had been tragic. It was said that she was a child of noble blood, a scion of Anglo-Irish aristocracy that had settled in the lands around Dunfoy. At that time the clan of Cavanagh sat proudly on the island of Innishios, which was a citadel of defiance to British authority. The people there recognized no authority but their own and abided by the laws as made by Owen Rua Cavanagh, their daring young leader, who would change the commandments of the Almighty.

Evidently this young Irish chieftain was as handsome as he was daring. Katie Farrington, evidently repeating a traditional description, referred to him as being as lovely as "Oisín in the Land of the Young". Little wonder, then, that when Polly Francis McCracken, fresh from the London Court, saw him in the market place at Dunfooy, she lost her heart to him. And he was so taken by her proud pallid beauty that "he couldn't close an eye thinking of her every minute of the day."

The romance of the young lovers makes a tragic story. Owen's request for her hand in marriage was scornfully declined by the powerful Sir John Francis McCracken, who immediately confined his daughter to the house. The story of the young lovers was noised abroad, and their cause became the adopted cause of every man, woman and child for miles around. So plainly were the sympathies of the population shown in their favour and against him that Sir John resolved to send his daughter away. But on the eve of her departure for England she was smuggled out of the house and into the arms of her Owen Rua. Her escape was discovered almost immediately, and pursuit was close. The young couple managed to reach the boat, but had not pulled a great distance from the land when the soldiers arrived on the shore. The detail was led by a young inexperienced officer who, losing his head, ordered his men to fire on the boat. Some say that in the twilight he could not see the girl and believed that Owen Rua had concealed her somewhere on the mainland. The truth was that the young Irishman, fearing that they might be fired upon, deliberately stood upright to draw the bullets high. He received a fatal wound in the chest and fell dead at the young girl's feet. The tragic Polly pulled the boat across the Sound to the island that was to have been their home. All the subsequent entreaties of her father could not persuade her to leave her island fastness. She adopted the name of Cavanagh, which would have been hers had

her husband lived, and she replaced him as leader not only on the island but in the hearts of the people.

"Of course," said Katie, "there were hundreds of people here then, and a village as big as a town. I often heard that the beach below would be covered with fish for the market at Dunfoy, and there was full and plenty for all."

I stared at her incredulously across the table. I had seen no evidence of any ruins to indicate that there had been many more houses on the island.

"There's not a living sign of a house now," Katie explained. "They were on the south side of the island, but everything is under the sea now. The land is sinking by the minute. When it's all gone that will be the end of the world."

Although her face was grave in the lamplight I could not believe that she was serious.

"You surely don't believe that?"

"I don't know," she replied gravely. "The prophecy is as old as the hills. I heard my mother talk about it, and she heard her mother talk about it. Saint Columcille said the same about Ireland itself. Before the last day there won't be a sign of Ireland or the Irish."

"It will be a strange world, indeed," I could not resist saying, "with the Irish gone."

"It will be more peaceful whatever," she flashed back at me.

Just then a sudden gust of wind rattled the doors and the windows and drove the rain against the glass. Involuntarily both of us looked at each other.

"It doesn't sound like it's going to blow over," I said.

"'Tis a bad sign when the rain beats against the window," she admitted.

I glanced at my watch. We had been talking for almost two hours. Something outside blew over with a metallic clang and rolled around on the small concrete yard. The

whine of the wind came under the kitchen door and the latch rattled as if somebody was trying to get in.

"I'll see you down to the pier," I told Katie, reaching for my mackintosh.

"You'll do no such thing," she said, adjusting her shawl on her head, and knotted the ends around her waist.

Ignoring her protest, I pulled on the coat and went out with her into the hall. Immediately I unlatched the front door it swung inwards as though pushed from outside by a mighty hand, and with it came the wind and the rain. I put my shoulder to the door and bolted it, and taking Katie by the elbow, led her back to the kitchen. The gust of wind had blown out the lamp and I relit it in the glow from the stove. When I replaced the globe I looked at Katie. Tiny beads of rain clung to her face like perspiration.

"I don't think you can go home to-night without being saturated," I told her, wondering how on earth I was going to handle this unexpected situation.

"I wouldn't like to be saturated," she said gravely.

"You can sleep upstairs in my bed," I said. "I'll do fine in a chair down here by the fire."

She removed her shawl, and was at once all business. "We can do better than that, surely. I'll fix you up a cot fit for a king. There's another mattress up there." She tramped up the stairs, and after much slamming of doors, she returned to the kitchen with a mattress and a pillow. In an incredibly short time she had a bed rigged on the floor, complete with a single blanket. "There," she said at last. "You'll do fine now." She put a few sods of peat into the stove and picked up her shawl. I guessed the latter was to replace the blanket she had given me from my bed. As an afterthought she foraged two old sacks from the hall and laid one at the foot of the rear door to baffle the draught. She gave the other to me.

"When I go out, put that at the end of this door. It'll

stop the draught." She looked at me, her black eyes twinkling. "Funny the two of us being cut off like this."

I think I was a little embarrassed more by the fact that she had proved herself so much more resourceful than me. She misunderstood my expression, and chuckled.

"You needn't have any fear, boy," she said. "I'm old enough to be your mother."

"I'm older than I look," I told her, nettled.

"Well, your elder sister, then," she returned, so obviously enjoying my confusion that I was beginning to get angry.

Before she closed the door I caught a glimpse of her eyes filled with merriment.

"Although," she said, "I might surprise you."

As soon as she was gone I positioned the sack at the foot of the door and took off my boots. I finished a cigarette and extinguished the lamp. It seemed as though the darkness was a signal for the storm to redouble its fury. Sounds that were imperceptible before became strident now, and the rain was loud against the window panes.

In the glow from the fire, I slipped under the single blanket.

I was glad I was not alone in the house.

§ 3

I HAVE never had the opportunity of learning anything about the man who built this house, beyond the fact that he was Cathal O'Riain's father, but I have tried, through the structure itself, to formulate some idea of his character. He must have scorned comfort, for there was little that was comfortable about the house. It was draughty, and built on very austere lines. There were no unsuspected nooks or alcoves. The walls reaching from floor to ceiling

were as plain and factual as the man himself must have been. The hallway bored right through the house, squeezed by a staircase which led steeply to the landing, and ended in a blank wall where one would have expected to find a doorway. In the area overshadowed by the stairs was a bizarre assortment of odds and ends, from thigh-high waders and oilskins to odd rowlocks, old rope, and a sewing machine. This latter was the only feminine thing in the house, apart from the wisps of curtains at the windows, which, in charity to Mrs. O'Riain, I would say were hung by the rude hand of her husband. But evidently Mr. O'Riain senior knew what he wanted, and built his house to endure against the elements that he had known since childhood. Only the kitchen door broke the smoothness of the rear wall, which faced north. The eastern gable was unbroken also, and what windows faced west and south were small and graceless and set sparingly into the thick mass concrete. In any other setting the house would have been a monstrosity, but perched on the high dome of this island it seemed sensible and practical, though it could, perhaps, have been made a little more comfortable. In the days that followed, all of us had reason to thank the wisdom and vision of its builder, but on the first night of the storm its strength was an unknown quantity to me.

Some time after Katie went upstairs I fell asleep on the mattress before the fire, but awoke some hours later to find the world splitting asunder outside. I lit the lamp. There was a sense of pressure on all sides of the house, and the doors and windows rattled crazily. The sacking that Katie had placed at the foot of the rear door had been blown back slightly and the rain had encroached on the kitchen floor. A boiling sea seemed to be raging under my very feet, and occasionally—although in this I must have been wrong—the floor seemed to tremble. After a while I could very easily distinguish between the sound of the sea and the occasional heavy breaker. The roar of the wind,

which was well-nigh constant, had an unmistakable quality of its own. The rattle of the rain was audible only when it careened against the window-panes.

As a mercenary soldier I had been in many odd places and contrived to sleep under as many unusual circumstances, but for the rest of this night I did not sleep at all, nor did I try. It was as though I were expecting the house to come apart, or else slip over the cliff edge to the rock below. I sat at the table and tried to work at my writing, but the sounds of the storm filled my mind and I was unable to concentrate. Finally I abandoned the attempt, and tried to make the fire as bright and cheerful as possible. I was engaged in this when Katie Farrington came in. She was fully dressed, but it was obvious that she had been asleep. Her shawl was draped over her shoulders. She looked, a little apprehensively I thought, at the strained doors and window. Then she said :

“I’m worried about the poor creatures down below.”

It was only then that I remembered that the others were on the island.

We made some tea and sat down to await the dawn.

At daylight I went down to the cottages. From the oddments beneath the stairs Katie had provided me with a full suit of oilskins. They were stiff and mildewed, but they kept out the rain that met me outside. I found it incredibly difficult to keep on the road from the houses. Innishios is innocent of trees, or even shrubs worthy of the name, apart from a few sparse clumps of gorse, and the wind swept unhindered over the comparative nakedness of grass and heather. It was a blustering gale, holding you immobile one moment, pummelling you in the back the next, and sometimes leaving you in a brief pause of quiet broken only by the falling rain.

The Sound was a sea of spume-flecked turmoil, and the flying spindrift shut out the mainland from view. The clouds were down on the sea.

I had almost reached the first cottage when I saw somebody coming up against me. It turned out to be Frankie Casey, clad like myself in oilskins.

"I was coming up to see how ye got on?" he shouted at me, his face streaming.

"And I'm down here to find out how you people fared."

We both laughed.

"Everything all right above?"

I nodded. "How did things go with you during the night?"

"Divil a shake out of us." His moustache dripped water from each end.

"Katie couldn't come down."

"Good job, too. Couple of her windows were stove in. Come on down awhile. Dan was meanin' to have a word with ye, anyway."

We went down together past the first three houses and into the last. Dan O'Leary and his two sons were in the kitchen, three big men around a blazing fire. Dan looked over his shoulder in surprise when we came in.

"You're back fast"—then he saw me: "Wisha come on in and welcome." He turned briefly to clout his son Jackeen across the knee. "You're sitting on your fat bottom all the morning. Take off your coat, Mr. Cartwright, and stay awhile."

"I told him ye wanted a word with him," said Casey, who, with astonishing rapidity, had reverted to his waistcoat.

"I do so," Dan agreed, as I peeled off, but even after I was seated in the chair his grinning son had vacated, he did not come to the point.

"Things went all right up there with ye?"

"They did, indeed. Not much sleep, though."

"Last night wasn't a night for sleep. The devil was abroad. Katie Farrington wasn't drowned or anything like that?"

"She was not. She was going to come down, but it was too bad."

"Wise of her not to have tried," said Dan. "This thing looks like it's going to get worse." He pulled a watch from his waistcoat pocket. "In about half-an-hour we'll be at full ebb of tide, and then it will come flooding back. But the funny part about it is that at this very minute it looks like the tide hasn't gone out at all. Now I think that if the wind blew from the north, with us in the lee of the land, we'd be all right, but if it keeps on from the south things will get very damp around here. Katie's place has two windows blown in—that's not a whole lot of damage, but the way things are, the sea will be breaking against our south wall when the tide is full." He crossed his knees. "As a matter of fact we might have to move up to you for a while. 'Tis possible that the whole lot of us might be paying ye a visit unless a miracle happens. This cursed island is sinking under our feet." He looked at me keenly beneath his bushy eyebrows. "D'ye know the story of it?"

"Katie told me last night," I said.

Dan and Casey exchanged a glance, as if the fact that Katie had mentioned the legend was significant in itself.

"Well, 'twas the truest words she ever spoke," said Dan.

I looked around at the four men in the kitchen. The two younger men were no longer grinning now, and their faces were as solemn as Dan's and Casey's. I realized that they believed the legend as though it were an article of faith.

"Of course," said Dan, "it might not be the time yet. Apart from the tide not going out far enough, I often saw it worse than this. Didn't we, Frankie?"

Casey was grinding a nut of tobacco between his palms and his empty pipe hung from his lips. "I seen it as bad all right. But there's what Polly said"

"I was thinking of that," said Dan. "Anyway, we have to make the best of it, so here and now we form a committee of five, and 'tis our job to see that the women and children come to no harm." He spread his hardened palm and ticked off on his fingers. "There's your wife, Frankie, and your three children, and there's Polly and Katie Farrington, and we must see that they're fed and found and snug. And that's going to be a damn sight harder to do than it sounds."

In the next half-hour while we discussed our common problems I found Dan to be a man of resource and decision. I also discovered many things about the communal life of the islanders. I had not suspected that there was any livestock on Innishios, but it transpired that there was. The half-a-dozen sheep, an equal number of goats, and one cow, all of whom survived on the island's scanty grazing, were at this moment in the stalls at the back of the houses. There were sufficient stocks of fodder to last a few weeks, so our milk supply seemed assured. Flour was also in good supply, as were tea, sugar, and bacon. Fuel was no problem, since a good harvest of peat was well saved, and every cottage as well as the house on the hill had a good stock.

"So," said Dan, when all these items had been considered, "we're not badly off, considering everything. The only thing we have to do is to keep the rain and the cold out and try to keep on the island in spite of wind, rain, and high water. What do ye think, Mr. Cartwright?"

I was oddly pleased that he had asked my opinion, for I knew that it was not done to flatter me nor to make me feel one of the company. This man was wise, and though he would glean some profit from the suggestions of a fool, I felt he would not ask a fool for an opinion.

"As you say," I told him, "the women and children must be our primary consideration. I am not familiar with the weather in these parts, but if you, backed by years of

experience, see danger in our present position, I am willing to accept it as very real. So I suggest that we get the women and children up to the big house right away. Indeed, I'd go so far as to suggest that everybody move up there as soon as possible.

Frankie Casey was shaking his head even before I finished speaking. "I don't think all of us should go up."

"We have no way of telling when it might be absolutely necessary," I told him. "And it would be better to transfer in daylight and before the weather gets even worse than it is now."

Dan laid a hand on my knee. "Ye have a sound head on your shoulders, but what Frankie says is right. Even to shift the women and children would be no easy job—though I agree with ye there that it must be done, and this very day. We must take beds and mattresses and bedclothes and ware, all sorts of odds and scraps. We must transport them in the wind and the rain and still keep them dry. But down here there is the livestock to feed and the cow to be milked, and we must have a hand to close a window or a door to see that the storm don't get in before it has to. So it's agreed that myself and Jackeen and Oweneen stay down here, and everybody else goes up."

"I don't hear anybody else agreein' to that only yourself," said Frankie Casey.

"'Tis no great distance to the big house," argued Dan, "and we can move quickly if need be. Mr. Cartwright will want you up above to keep order among your children and three women."

"Ye choose the easy task then, I'm thinkin'," said Frankie.

"All right so," said our chairman, coming to his feet. "Now we've got to tell the women in such a way that we don't put the heart across them. It might all be just a bottle of smoke, but 'tis better to be sure than to be

sorry. I'll tell Polly, and Frankie, you tell Rita." He looked at me and smiled. "What's your first name, at all?"

"David", I told him.

"Well, Davy, while I'm gone, try to puzzle out a scheme to transport our little community and its equipment up that hill before nightfall."

As the two older men got into their oilskins, Oweneen, who was the younger of Dan's two sons, sat down on the chair his father had vacated and stared solemnly into the fire.

"Wouldn't we look a lot of bloody fools," he said, "if the sun came out to-morrow?"

"We would, indeed," agreed Dan, caustically, "but I know one fellow with his shins in the fire, and the devil a bit of difference it would make to his looks if the sun shines or not."

As the two men opened the door I saw the leaden sky outside, so low and dark that it was easy to believe the sun would never pierce it again.

In about half-an-hour Dan returned alone.

"Rita and her clan have agreed to go up," he announced. "We'll be seeing about getting their stuff up right away."

"How about Polly?" I asked.

"Polly is going to stay until she has to move."

§ 4

THE translation of the goods and chattels of Frankie Casey and his family was an epic of ingenuity and improvisation. Bundles of bed-clothing, food, flour, and meat, wrapped tightly in oilskins or anything that served to keep out the rain, were taken up the hill to the big house. Chairs, ware and cutlery, pictures, pots and pans, and a weird assortment of useless objects belonging to the three small

children, included only after passionate protests, were included in the translation. It sounds easy in the telling, but it took five men four hours to complete the job, and even then we had to leave the bed frames and be content with the mattresses alone. As it was, we lost one of these when it was literally torn from both mine and Frankie's hands half-way up to the house. Indeed, we were fortunate we did not follow it over the low cliff into the boiling sea. As the day progressed the wind grew stronger, until towards evening it was shrieking over the heather, and it was dangerous to stand anywhere on the road to the house. We could scarcely retain our footing, and decided to send two with each bundle, no matter how small, one as a bearer and the other as a human anchor and general security officer.

Frankie's wife and children were the last to leave, muffled and belted against the weather. By then we were operating in a premature murky twilight. The wind blew fiercely from the south, and the sea was terrifyingly close to Dan's home. Indeed, from outside the big house the pathetically small cottage seemed already in the deadly embrace of the sea.

"I think I'll be looking in on ye to-night," said Dan.

Frankie Casey and myself were standing with him in the rain.

"I believe Davy here is right after all," remarked Casey. "Maybe while we have the light we should move up the livestock and yerselves."

"And will we bed the cow and the sheep in the kitchen?" enquired Dan with mild sarcasm.

"There's the parlour, if need be," agreed Casey. "Judgin' by the looks of that sea ye won't be stayin' in yer own house to-night."

Dan brushed the rainwater from his face. "We might be dry enough in your place or Polly's. 'Twould want to get real bad before 't would reach that far."

"You'll get little sleep to-night anyway, wherever you bed down," said Casey.

Dan shrugged. "'Tisn't sleep I'll be thinking of." He turned to his sons, who had their backs to the wall of the house. "Look at the pair of them, in the name of God! Will ye take your rumps from against the wall and let us be going down." He thumped my chest gently with his fist. "We'll be seeing ye all to-morrow, Davy, don't you fret."

Dan was a poor prophet. He was to see us long before morning.

When he and his sons had gone down to the cottages, Frankie and I went inside to organize our little community, only to find that the matter had been taken out of our hands by Katie Farrington. All the paraphernalia had been dispersed to various regions of the house, and although the dresser bulged with extra ware, and the stove was festooned with more kettles and pans than usual, it was only the children who gave the impression that the house was crowded.

Rita Casey, whom I had not remembered meeting before, was still a young woman, more than fifteen years, I would say, younger than her husband. She had been on the island only eight years, but she might have been born there, for all the fear she showed in her present position. True, a trace of anxiety was evidenced now and again in an apprehensive glance as the rain rattled against the window, or a glance upwards at the ceiling during a particularly strong blast of wind. But apart from these normal indications of uneasiness she was as calm as if transferring her home to a strange house was an everyday occurrence. She had supreme confidence in her husband. I saw her look at him now and again, and although nothing passed between them, she obviously drew strength and courage from his presence. When he was out of the kitchen she fretted and spoke irritably to the children, but once he returned she was serene once more.

The children, all girls, showed a marked resemblance to their mother. They were, as Katie said, "like steps of stairs", the eldest being seven, and the other two six and five respectively. They were perfectly healthy children, astonishingly mature, apt to argue fiercely among themselves, and yet capable of the tenderest affection towards one another. They were completely unaware of any crisis, and though they were a joy to watch, I was somewhat relieved when Frankie put them to bed upstairs. Frankie in the role of father was a revelation. It was plainly apparent that he was a complete slave to his children. When he sat by the fire they played over and under his knees. They tugged at his waistcoat, pulled his moustache, and the youngest child, determined to pluck out his eye, climbed on to his chest to do it. Frankie would never say a word, but emitted unintelligible grunts that could have meant anything. Only when his wife spoke sharply to them did they give the poor man any rest, and this invariably proved a brief respite, for after a moment they renewed their activities. Of Katie Farrington, although she berated them like a virago and threatened them with the most terrible punishment, they were absolutely unafraid. It seemed to me they rather enjoyed her raving, for even the youngest would suspend operations to listen to her with an air of great interest. They knew Katie better than I. The last I saw of them that night they were draped around their father in spotless nighties as he took them upstairs to the improvised bed.

Katie had found and assembled an old bed-frame, and the children slept in this on their own mattress in a room bright with a peat-and-wood fire. By the time Frankie returned, Rita and Katie had tidied the kitchen. Without the children the place seemed vast and empty.

Rita looked at her husband as he came in. "Do you think they'll go off?"

"They were asleep before I came down," he told her,

"although how they could sleep with the wind thumping on the window beats me. 'Tis a terrible night altogether."

"It can't get no worse surely," said Katie.

We drew a measure of comfort from this, for it indeed seemed that the fury outside was as bad as it could become. In the comparative quiet after the children, the noises of the storm pressed in upon us, stifling our conversation and isolating each of us in his own thoughts. Rita and Katie knitted, and we two men had little else to do than stare at the fire and listen to the wind. Frankie was visibly uneasy. He kept shifting his chair, and seemed to be having difficulty in getting his pipe to draw well. He disassembled it a few times to make a great business of cleaning and overhauling it. Finally, he gave a tremendous sigh.

"I'm just thinkin' of that madman Leary tryin' to drown his two sons on a night like to-night."

He glanced over his shoulder to where our oilskins hung on the back door. Only I saw that glance, and understood the significance of it.

His wife glanced up from her knitting. "Dan O'Leary is safe, or nobody is. Besides, hasn't he Jackeen and Oweneen to take care of him?"

Frankie said nothing, but settled in his chair once more and pulled at his pipe, but a nerve on the bunched muscles of his jaw jumped and spread and jumped again. I knew that both of us were thinking the same thoughts.

The roar of the sea was persistent now, and I guessed that if its fury was bad beneath us in the lee of the island it must be terrifying down where the cottages stood in the mane of the wind. It was almost eleven o'clock when Frankie slapped his hands on his knees and came to his feet.

"I'm goin' down below to see how they're getting on," he announced.

His wife stopped her knitting, little clouds of fear darkening her eyes.

"Are you going out of your mind? You'd be blown off the island."

"Yerra whist, woman," said Frankie, gently, "and have sense. How can I sit here, not knowing what that eejit of a man is doin' down there. It won't take a minute."

I lifted myself from the chair. "I think I'll walk along with you to stretch my legs," I told him, and got a warm look of gratitude from Rita.

Frankie grinned at me. "'Tis a perfect night and all for a stroll, with a full moon."

"That's what was tempting me outside," I said.

He nodded his head with satisfaction. "All right, so. The air will do us good."

The manner in which Katie and Rita helped us with our oilskins reminded me of the ladies of old buckling on their knight's armour. A storm lantern was lighted, and bearing this more as a beacon than a guide, we were let out into the night. Before the door closed, I noticed that Katie had her beads already in her hands.

The fury of the storm was unbelievable. The roar of sea and wind combined to create a cacophony that was well-nigh deafening. It confused the mind and paralysed the limbs. The swift transition from the warmth of the kitchen to this maelstrom gave the night a curious unreality. For a few moments it was like living in a terrible nightmare. Reality returned when Casey locked his arm in mine, and we moved down towards the cottages, picking up in the light of the lantern the fringe of heather marking the road's edge. The icy rain bit into our faces and numbed our hands, while the wind searched for our mouths and nostrils to smother us with our own breath. I walked outside Frankie, nearest the sea, like a blind man, guided only by my companion. We couldn't have been more than a few hundred yards from the cottages when Frankie Casey stopped and I felt his arm stiffen. I knew he was either listening or straining his eyes ahead in the

darkness. He put the lantern behind his back, and both of us leaned forward against the wind. Down below I thought I glimpsed a faint yellow light. I thought at first it was one of the lighted windows of the cottages, until Frankie put his mouth to my ear, his moustache like wet moss against my face.

“They’re on the road and in trouble I’m thinkin’.”

We hurried then, a little less cautious of our bearing, trying to feel the hardness of the road under our feet. The yellow point of bobbing light ahead grew almost imperceptibly nearer, but finally, after what seemed hours, resolved into a lantern in the fist of Dan O’Leary. With him were his two sons clothed in oilskins and supporting between them the small figure of Polly Cavanagh, so muffled against the rain that I could not see her face. Only one pale hand was visible. Nobody exchanged a word. Instinctively I realized we were witnessing the aftermath of near tragedy and that the danger still persisted. We bunched together, forming a screening knot around the woman, and faced up the slope. With the wind behind us the going was easier, but it jostled us together and plucked at our legs as though trying to unbalance us.

Katie and Rita must have been watching for us through the window, for the door of the house was opened before we reached it. Polly was taken from us as we trooped in, but the sodden O’Learys were not forgotten, nor were we. From some unsuspected hiding-place in the house, Katie Farrington produced a bottle of cloudy spirit, and although I have drunk many beverages, none of them had the raw reviving bite of that.

“It’ll put the heart’s blood back into you,” said Frankie.

While Katie and Rita tended Polly in the kitchen, Frankie and I found enough clothing between us to dress the O’Leary clan, and even managed to find sufficient footwear for them, although Oweneen ended up in my slippers. The bottle was passed round again and again, and finally seemed

to restore Dan's power of speech. With his hair tousled from the towelling and his face unusually pale in the lamp-light, he looked oddly unfamiliar.

"I've seen many a night, Frankie, but nothing like this."

Frankie's pipe was going well at last, and the general air of tension was beginning to relax.

"I had it reasoned out," continued Dan, "that as soon as I could tell the difference between rain and spray at the window we would move next door to your place. But we never had a chance. We didn't even have time to put a coat on our backs. One moment we were sitting beside the fire thinking of bed, and the next the sea was in the window, and the whole raging Atlantic Ocean was beating down the door. I tell you we were soaked to the skin before we got up from the fire. The next sea nearly washed us out the back door." He looked steadily at Frankie. "Your place will go, too, I'm thinking."

Frankie paused a moment to press the tobacco down in the bowl. "God send us no greater loss," he said.

Dan began towelling his head again. "The beasties and cow are gone. We couldn't get to them in the dark. We found Polly in bed with her beads in her hands and one of her windows blown in. She didn't want to come. She said it was one part of the dream she wasn't sure about."

"What part?"

"She wasn't sure whether she was to die in her own house or up here."

The five of us looked at the lamplight, and the wind rattled the door.

"Die, is it," said Frankie. "Well, we'll see. And God won't be too hard on us."

§ 5

THE next morning the wind backed to the north, but continued to blow as strongly as ever, only this time there was a sinister bite in it. Dan O'Leary and his sons went

out in the early morning to search for the livestock, but returned without seeing even a sign of them. They reported that with the exception of Polly's, the condition of the cottages below was bad, and that the sea was breaking regularly over their own home. They were convinced that the island had subsided at least twelve feet—something I found very hard to believe. My own theory was that extraordinary weather, coinciding with certain lunar conditions, had resulted in unusually high water, but I kept that theory to myself.

There was no attempt to minimise the seriousness of the loss of our milk supply and meat on the hoof. Under normal circumstances the loss would have been heart-breaking for these poor people, but under present conditions it was disastrous. After midday, we took it in relays of two to transfer the peat from Polly's cottage to augment our own supply. I was appalled at the damage done to the two cottages nearest the sea. The roof tree of both was broken and the thatch sagged in the middle. I thought that all the windows and door had been battered in, but we could not approach too closely, for the waves had claimed them with grasping claws of spray.

Rita Casey cried a little when she learned about the cottage, but her husband made light of it.

"We'll build another, don't fret. On higher ground and with plenty of space and wide windows, and the door in the right place. And I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't cost us a ha'penny. We'll get compensation out of this."

There was no talk of building on the mainland. Even now, when they suspected their homeland was sinking under their feet, they were determined to cling to the island.

Dan O'Leary and Oweneen formed the last relay, and they told us about the boat on their return.

"If your boat keeps on rattling around the way she is, Frankie, you'll either lose her or she'll be stove in. We couldn't reach her to make her fast."

Casey showed greater concern at the possible loss of his boat than the more definite loss of his house.

"If it lets up a bit I'll go down and see what can be done," he said.

But it did not let up, and by nightfall the gale had developed into a near hurricane. We lost some slates off the roof, and the rain seeped through the ceilings of all the rooms upstairs. Buckets and pails were mobilised to deal with this emergency, and mattresses and bedclothes were shifted downstairs. A fire was lighted in the room across the hall from the kitchen, and the unperturbed children were put to bed there. It was almost midnight when the rest of us could gather around the fire for a general discussion on our position. Only then did I become aware of Polly Cavanagh. We men had been so preoccupied with the business of searching and fetching, of drying ourselves and getting wet again, that her presence passed unnoticed, although I recalled Katie Farrington's remark some time earlier that the old woman was feeling poorly. To-night, seated in the corner by the stove, she certainly did not look well. I thought at first that it must be because I had not seen her with her head uncovered before, and that the snow-white hair, parted in the middle and pressed close to her head, gave her an unusually ashen look. Her wrinkled hands held on her lap had a visible tremor, and her breathing was rapid.

Dan O'Leary must have noticed how ill she looked. He squatted beside her and placed a hand on her knee.

"I think you're getting a chill, Polly. Would you like a drop to heat ye?"

The old woman smiled slightly. "It'll take more than your drop to keep the cold out now, Dan O'Leary. I'm thinking it's the cold of death is on me."

Katie Farrington, who had been brewing the inevitable pot of tea, turned on her in feigned fury, but the glance she threw at Rita was of tortured anxiety.

"What kind of talk is that, Polly? You'll be asking us to bury you yet. The devil himself would feel the cold on a night like to-night. You should be in bed with a hot punch."

Polly looked at her with piteous entreaty.

"I'd like to stay with you all around the fire. The room would be dark, and I'd only be disturbing the children."

Rita Casey proved to be the practical one. "Why can't we rig up a bed for you, Polly, just in the corner beside the fire, and ye can rest content and in company. You'll never get any ease in that hard old chair."

The light in Polly's eyes was eloquent enough. Without a word, Dan O'Leary and Casey went upstairs and brought down a bedstead and assembled it beside the stove. While Katie and Rita prepared the old woman for bed, the men went into the hall. Here the wind and the rain were buffeting the door relentlessly, and after the warmth of the kitchen, we felt chilled and oddly dispirited. Casey lit his pipe.

"Never seen Polly so bad."

"I think she's on her way home," said Dan.

"Only a day before the rest of us," said Frankie solemnly.

Dan sighed. "That's all that's in it. We must all travel the same road."

Oweneen and Jackeen said nothing, and for the first time in my life I was never so aware of the inevitability of death. I felt suddenly afraid, and was relieved when we returned to the kitchen. The addition of the bed to the kitchen equipment, and the knowledge that Polly was seriously ill, had a depressing effect on all of us. But it did not last long, and it was Polly herself who dispelled the gloom.

"Wisha, the deep sighs of all of ye," she said, as the silence extended itself about us, "and the long faces. You're not waking me yet, you know. Will you give us a bit of a song, Dan?"

Dan looked at her in astonishment, but he recovered immediately. "Did ye ever hear me sing a note in my life, Polly Cavanagh?"

"Indeed I did," said Polly, staring up at the ceiling with memories in her eyes, "but that was before you lost your fine woman."

Dan's gaze returned to the fire, and his face strangely softened.

"It was a hard blow for you to take, Dan, and you've never been the same man since."

His forehead furrowed.

"How long ago was that, Dan? My memory is not good now."

"'Tis a good while," said Dan.

"All of twenty years it is, Dan. Twenty years, and it took the song out of you. But the bitterness died, thank God, much sooner than that."

"Wouldn't it be selfish of me to want her back out of the happiness she has," said Dan. "Back to the reek of the turf and the cold of the floor. . . . But I missed her."

I noticed that Jackeen and Oweneen were looking at their father with sympathetic eyes, feeling for him alone, since they could scarcely have remembered their mother. Here in the lamplight it seemed that this woman unknown to me had died but yesterday. One had to look at death in a different perspective in Ireland.

"She was a fine girl," said Katie Farrington, "and a great neighbour." This remark was addressed to Rita Casey, whose knitting needle clicked and flashed in the lamplight.

"I remember the day ye were married, Dan," said Polly. "The song you sang at the wedding!"

"I had something to sing about," admitted Dan.

"And plenty of porter to soften yer vocal chords," said Casey. And laughter was with us again.

The conversation drifted into reminiscences of all those who were present at the wedding. Katie and Polly and the two older men began knitting the lives and subsequent movements of the people who gladdened that wedding day. There seemed an astonishing number of them dead. And so we forgot for the moment the hazards of the present in the memories of the past, and found a sense of cosy security in our close comradeship. Polly kept the conversation going, leading it when it flagged into alternative deep channels, and allowing the others to guide and divert it with the tools of their talk. Ultimately, she even managed to get me talking about myself. I told them of some of my wanderings and those things I had seen in lands they had only heard about. They listened with great interest, and I remember feeling as though I were talking to children. When I finished, Jackeen, whose eyes were shining, drew a deep breath.

“Ah! that is the way to live, surely. Different faces and places and strange manners and customs. It must be terribly interesting altogether.”

“Isn’t it strange that after all that,” wondered Oweneen, “ye should want to bide here?”

I envied him his illusions. “It might seem strange to you, Oweneen,” I told him, “but you have on this island the very thing the whole world is seeking. It may be in other parts of the world, too, but here is the only place I have known it.”

The boys did not understand me, but the others did.

“And please God,” said Polly, “what you have found you will never lose, nor will anybody take it from you.”

The following morning I awoke sore and unrefreshed. When all the talk had been done on the night before, we settled down to sleep as best we could. We left the kitchen to the women, and we five men made what shift we could

in the second room. We butted together what mattresses remained, and lay down, nobody bothering to undress. I lay awake most of the night listening to the storm outside, and envying Casey the tranquillity of his stentorian snores. Towards dawn I slept a little, and was awakened by the soreness of my bones. I rolled off the mattress on to the floor. Dan and Casey were talking quietly in the half-light. The weather sounded as bad as ever.

"You sleep like a child," remarked Dan.

"I didn't get much of it," I told them.

"The little you had will do ye good, whatever," consoled Dan. "I was just telling Casey here that we must have a shot at fixing the roof. Five men and three children trying to sleep in a room this size will never do."

"So one of us will have to be blown off the roof," said Casey.

"It might be possible to fix the holes from the inside," I suggested. "Even if the plugs leak a small bit we could get a couple of buckets above the bedroom ceiling."

"Just what I was saying!" said Dan, with satisfaction. "Another night in here would suffocate us all. Some of us will have to sleep upstairs."

Just then there was a tap on the door, and Katie put in her head. In the bad light she looked a little haggard.

"The fine sleep ye are after having. Could you do with a little breakfast?"

"We could try," said Dan, coming stiffly to his feet. "How did the night go with ye across the way?"

"We didn't do too bad, except for Frankie's snoring putting the heart across us. Poor Rita was mortified, being scandalised by her husband like that."

"Never snored in me life," said Casey, blandly. "'Twas the wind she heard."

"I must tell her," said Katie. She looked at me. "The fine book ye can write now."

I smiled at her. There was a fine thread of friendliness between myself and Katie. "I could so. I think I would call it 'The Vanishing Island'."

"Or 'The Vanishing Islanders'," said Casey, a remark I thought in poor taste. But I was irritable this morning.

While Jackeen and Oweneen and the three children still slept we had our breakfast. Polly, who was propped up with pillows, looked smaller and paler in the shadowed kitchen. Frankie Casey's wife seemed a little haggard, but she brightened considerably when her husband appeared. The smell and sizzle of frying bacon did much to cheer us.

"It takes a woman to make the best of a bad situation," said Dan, seating himself at the table. "This day we will organize ourselves indoors to make a few comforts."

"We will so," said Frankie.

"At least," continued Dan, spearing a slice of bread with a fork, "we will put Casey to sleep in the hall to snore in peace." He laid the butter on thickly and lifted the bread to his mouth. At that moment a drop of water fell with deadly precision on the top of his forehead. The incident petrified everybody, and drew every eye to the ceiling.

"Glory be to God!" said Dan, "didn't we forget to empty the buckets and baths upstairs. The place must be swimming by now."

The three of us had a belated breakfast.

§ 6

WE worked on the roof all that morning. The weather did not permit a direct attack on the outside, and some weird and wonderful ideas were introduced under the roof to prevent the rain from coming through the bedroom ceilings. There were almost a dozen slates off the roof, and unfortunately the leaks were fairly evenly proportioned

over the entire upper living area. Some were not very serious, but most of them allowed the rain in in steady trickles. Many of these responded to Dan's genius for improvisation, but one or two stubborn leaks still oozed water even after the most elaborate treatment. Finally, the most that could be said about the morning's work was that the quantity of receptacles used to catch the rainwater was reduced by half, and the remainder would have to be emptied only once a day. However, it was painfully clear that in spite of the small degree of success we achieved, the bedrooms would not be fit for habitation until the weather cleared.

We had by this time become more or less accustomed to the sounds of the storm which swept against the house, but while we were working in the attic under the slates, the fury outside was frightening. A million screaming devils seemed to people the dark space under the peaked roof, and the rain came like continuous hailstones. The timberwork groaned and creaked under the constant stress and strain, making it evident that strong though the house was, it was doubtful if it could withstand this buffeting indefinitely.

"That's a morning's work wasted, anyway," observed Frankie Casey, when we had finished. "There will be a dozen more holes to plug up to-morrow, and the devil a bit of a roof over us at all the day after."

"This old house stood up against many a storm," said Dan. "Old Davy O'Riain knew what he was building."

"Ay!" agreed Frankie, "but there was never a storm like this."

Dan did not deny that. "There must be a first time for everything," he temporised.

Towards evening the three of us donned oilskins and went out to look at the cottages below. The sea seemed to have claimed three of them completely, enveloping them in mottled patterns of flying spray. Only Polly's house

appeared untouched, but we couldn't be certain from where we stood. We were unable to make ourselves heard, for the wind tossed our words away or pressed them back into our throats before we could give them utterance. We had to wait until we got back into the house before we could talk.

"'Tis worse than yesterday," said Frankie. "The island is gone down a lot."

Dan was busy at some mental calculation. He consulted his watch. "It's not high water yet."

"That makes things even worse," said Frankie. "We must be going down like a stone."

Dan peeled off his oilskins. "God forbid! Anyway, we'll say nothing to the women."

I don't think that at this time I was so sure of my theory about lunar attraction and abnormal high tides. That the island was virtually sinking beneath our feet seemed plausible for the first time. Vanishing islands were not unknown. I had heard of them disappearing overnight, and even being created in a single day, but that was in the tropics, and in each case the cause was volcanic disturbance. Here, it seemed, we were being bludgeoned beneath the sea by the wind and the rain.

High water occurred at five o'clock, and we went out again to look at the houses below. This time Oweneen and Jackeen came with us. We stood close together on the road and braced ourselves against the howling rain. There could no longer be any doubt that we were witnessing something inexplicable. Though Polly's house was still above and beyond the full fury of the waves, the other three houses were being battered by tons of water. All about us the sea raged in relentless confusion, presenting an awe-inspiring, ever-changing pattern of irresistible force. The very ground seemed to tremble under the impact of the waves.

Dan and Frankie were roaring into each other's ears, but the younger men surveyed the scene in silence.

When we went back to the house we remained in the hall. Dan's face, streaming and slightly blue, was serious.

"Unless it lets up soon I wouldn't give much for our chances."

Somehow I hated to see him discouraged, and I attributed a great deal of his despondency to the legend of the vanishing island, and Polly's prophecy.

"I don't altogether agree, Dan," I said. "We're all right so far, and this can't last for ever."

"It don't have to last for ever," returned Dan. "Another night of this wind and rain and we'll have no roof over our heads. Besides, the island will not have to sink much more to have the sea breaking in on us up here."

"I don't believe the island has sunk at all," I told them, and explained my theory, although at that time I was not quite sure I was speaking the truth.

Frankie stared at me in surprise.

"That's an interesting story," he said, "but 'tis plain that something's sinking. Ye saw the houses below."

"It's just that the water is getting higher, and that gives the impression we're sinking," I explained. "That's not a condition that will last. If the island were sinking we'd feel it in the house."

They looked interested but unconvinced.

"I've lived on this island a long time, Davy," said Dan, "and I never saw water so high, so it must be that we have gone down to meet it. The ground even now is like jelly under your feet."

He was right in the latter point, for the shock of tons of water hurtling against the cliff beneath the house could be sensed through the leather of our boots.

"Anyway," said Frankie, supplementing Dan's argument, "don't ye be forgettin' what Polly said—a week and many a long week and only one to see the end of it."

He had scarcely finished speaking when the door through which we had entered a moment before was blown violently open and the gale rushed in among us like an infuriated presence. A second later, what appeared to be a cataract of green water, swept across our vision and crashed on the ground outside. In an instant there was inches of water in the hall. Oweneen put his shoulder to the door and closed it. The metal latch had been ripped off, but the bolt was intact. As the door was secured once more, Dan bent down and dipped his fingers in the water and touched his tongue.

"This is salt water," he said, solemnly. "The sea is beginning to break over this side of the island."

For an hour after this, occasional breakers leaped the forty-foot cliff to deluge the house, and we had to maintain a constant vigil upstairs, since many more slates had been blown off or smashed in, and the leaking roof was beginning to get out of control. Fortunately, when the tide receded a little we got no more than spindrift over the cliff, but the unexpected development of the sea invading a position we considered invulnerable had shaken us somewhat.

We were all a little uneasy as the night closed about us.

During the day Polly had visibly worsened. She could no longer sit upright, and seemed to have greater difficulty in breathing. Rita Casey, worn out with trying to control three restive children, was nervy and short-tempered, and it was evident that the strain was beginning to tell both on her and Katie Farrington. Katie announced the fact that there was no more butter with a curtness that was foreign to her.

"You're a great woman, Katie," I told her, as I sat down to the table. "The island has yet to be created that would sink under your feet."

I was surprised and gratified that she coloured at my tribute, and thereafter she regained some of her old spirit.

Later, when the children had been put to bed, we sat down to discuss our position. It was certain now that this bad weather would continue indefinitely, and because of the extensive damage already done to the roof and the constant menace of even worse a night, a continuous vigil was considered essential from now on. It was decided that each spell of night duty would be of four hours' duration, from midnight to four and from four to eight. Two men would share each shift, and it would be their duty to see that the house held together and that the large variety of receptacles collecting rainwater in the bedrooms upstairs were emptied before they overflowed. Since there were five, one man would have a completely free night every fifth day.

There was no longer any necessity to disguise from the women the very real danger that threatened us, since the evidence of it had been made apparent to them during the hours of high tide. Their fortitude was heartening and a source of great strength to us, but they obviously welcomed our suggestion of providing a constant watch during the night.

Polly did not even comment on our proposal; indeed already she was in the detached twilight of death, with only the deep rise and fall of her chest to show she was still with us. I doubt if she could hear us.

We men tossed a coin between us to determine what pair would begin the night's vigil, and it transpired that both myself and Casey made the first team, Dan and Oweneen the second, leaving Jackeen with a free night.

"The fine sleep he'll be having surely," was his father's comment, a remark that relaxed our tension somewhat, and earmarked the beginning of the strangest part of our adventure.

No sooner had our laughter died when we were immediately conscious of a sound that was neither the wind or the rain nor the sea. It was a thin whine, pitched so highly that it was more sensed than heard. I remember feeling

Dan's apprehensive eyes on me as he canted his head like a spaniel, and I remember also noticing that Polly's breathing became more agitated and her thin yellow fingers clutched convulsively at the bedclothes. A moment later the sound had ceased, leaving us in a pause of utter calm, for it seemed that the storm had ceased its own trumpeting to listen to this intruder. I saw Katie Farrington cross herself hurriedly, a bleak expression of fear on her face for the first time. Rita Casey's eyes were fixed on her husband as if there she would find mirrored the answer to the dilemma.

Slowly, in an oddly detached manner, Dan O'Leary came to his feet and walked to the window. We watched him pull the wisp of curtain to one side and brush his palm over the glass. He shielded his eyes from the kitchen light and peered into the darkness. Nobody spoke, but at that instant the sounds of the storm were renewed, and we heard a shock of rain rattle against the window. Instinctively, Dan recoiled, and came over to the fire again.

"Did ye ever hear the like of it in your lives?"

"It must have been only the wind," said Frankie, without conviction.

For some reason everybody looked at me as though being a stranger and familiar with places and people unknown to them, I could supply an explanation.

"I've never heard anything like it before," I said, "although Frankie could be right. I can't think of anything else that could cause it. Since it's a freak storm, it is reasonable to expect many unusual sounds."

The tension was beginning to ease. Already I was beginning to forget the precise characteristics of the noise that had startled us. Had I been alone I would have been convinced that it had been a trick of the imagination. Gradually, we relaxed, with the solitary exception of Polly. The old woman was sitting upright now, a wild expectant

expression on her wrinkled face, as if anticipating a recurrence of the phenomenon. She clutched the bedclothes so tightly that the knuckles were spots of pure white against the veined parchment of her skin. "'There's my dream out," she said.

"It was only the wind, Polly," soothed Katie. "It's cutting capers to-night."

The old woman made a small gesture of impatience, as though Katie's words had distracted her from some intense concentration. Katie looked at us in bewilderment; she opened her mouth to say something, and emitted a half-scream as a peremptory knocking sounded on the rear door.

It is difficult to describe the effect the knocking had on us, and hard to understand why I immediately and without question accepted the fact that this latest sound was created by an agent other than the storm. Coming on the heels of our previous experience, it completely unnerved us. We knew that apart from ourselves there was not a living soul on the island, and it appeared that even now somebody stood outside the door demanding entry. I had never believed in supernatural happenings and had been raised in the belief that death ended all existence, yet at that moment the entire structure of my beliefs was levelled, and I was prepared to believe in anything. One thing only was I sure of: I did not want the door opened nor did I want to know the identity of the person or thing that stood outside. There was no doubt that the rest felt the same way. Katie's face was so ashen that I thought she would faint. Rita clutched convulsively at her husband's arm. Dan O'Leary and his sons stared wide-eyed at the door, and Casey's pipe lay neglected on the floor, where it had fallen from his mouth. Polly's behaviour was bewildering. She had lost the intense attitude of listening and had once more lain back on the pillows. She seemed perfectly calm.

The knock had been a peremptory tattoo, but now the sound of the wind came clearly from outside. After my initial fright, reason was beginning to assert itself. Something, a pike handle or a broom of some wreckage from the sea had been thrown against the door and had played on the taut strings of our nerves. A logical explanation must lie beneath this apparent phenomenon, and I was beginning to feel ashamed of myself, when the tattoo was repeated—not the irregular and haphazard knock of a plaything of the wind, but measured blows making a definite pattern of sound.

Once more I became the centre of all eyes, as if I alone possessed the answer to this eerie dilemma, but it must have been apparent from my face that I could not help them. Then Polly, with a surprising show of strength that added to the eeriness of the moment, lifted herself on her elbows and fixed her paling eyes on me.

“Open the door. Can you escape your destiny?”

The sound of her voice had an immediate calming effect on me, and her words were oddly compelling. I stood up and walked to the door. As I passed Katie I saw her make a movement with her hand as though she would detain me, but her fingers merely brushed my sleeve. I reached the door as the knocking was repeated, and paused for a moment before making the crucial decision. I glanced once at Polly, half expecting further instructions, but her gaze was over my shoulder, as though already fastened on whatever stood on the other side of the straining timbers.

I unbolted the door and allowed it to swing back against my foot, sufficiently far to allow me to see outside, and still partially shield my body. A gloved hand, strangely slender, rested against the door-post. The pressure on the door increased, but I did not know if it was the wind or if somebody was pushing from outside. I leaned a little to one side so that I could see around the edge of the door,

and involuntarily removed my foot. The wind and the rain swept triumphantly into the kitchen, and with them came our strange visitant.

The flame of the oil lamp flared wildly and almost went out, and a puff of smoke billowed from the stove and sailed like incense to the ceiling as I placed my back against the door and bolted it. . . . Whatever and whoever this strange being was, it now formed one of our company. As enemy or friend was yet to be revealed.

Frankly there was nothing fearsome about this stranger, and one thing that was immediately apparent and reassuring, she was a woman. She was almost as tall as myself and clothed in a one-piece suit belted at the waist and clinging as tightly to her legs as ballerina hose. The blouse portion of the suit was of a material that resembled leather, but seemed much thinner and softer. The rain gleamed on it in crystalline beads. A tasselled cap resembling wool was pulled on her head and hid her ears. Although she had stood outside in the rain for some time, her apparel did not appear sodden or in any way uncomfortable.

All this I noticed, even as she stepped beyond me to the centre of the kitchen, but I had merely glimpsed at her face. I circled her now to prop my back against the table, and stared at her. Her beauty was startling. I could perhaps attempt to describe it in great detail, but I would give little conception of the reality, for I have never seen beauty such as she possessed. The rain still clung to the creamy pallor of her skin, and as I watched her, she pulled off her stocking cap to reveal short blond hair, boyishly cut. She smoothed it fleetingly with a gloved hand. Her calm regard slowly appraised our astonishment, as though she were viewing a tableau, and I thought I saw her lips twitch in amusement. I was the last to meet the shock of her regard. I had the impression of eyes that could be either grey or green and charged with a strange magnetic power.

“Who are you?” I asked her. “How did you get on the island?”

Her eyebrows lifted a little at my question, but her expression remained unchanged. She seemed to ignore my questions, for she looked again at the others, all of whom were on their feet, still petrified, in various attitudes of amazement. Then she raised her left hand. I noticed that it had been hovering over a holster-like pouch fastened to her suit below the hip, and spread the fingers of one hand against her breasts. She said, by way of introducing herself:

“Lanadora.”

§ 7

My mind was beginning to free itself from the clogging sediment of superstition. Two things were blatantly obvious. She had not reached the island *via* the sea, even by shipwreck, since her clothing was comparatively dry, and—this I found astonishing—of all the people under this roof she was the most composed. Not only that, but there seemed to emanate from her personality a sense of power which fixed our respective relationships at once. I felt instinctively that she was in complete command not only of the unusual situation but of each of us.

Her garb hinted that she might be an aviator forced down on the island. I thought of the wind outside, and the thick wiry heather that covered the island, and the chances of anybody, however skilled, landing an aircraft on our wide-swept citadel. I could not envisage the pilot of such an aircraft remaining as unruffled and composed as this young lady, even if she did not have to step from a tangle of twisted spars and metal. Besides, there was something distinctly foreign about her that I could not associate with any race or nation. Her eyes, for instance, though ever so slightly oblique, were not oriental, and they

seemed unusually large and luminous even in the lamp-light.

I asked her again how she got on the island, and once more became the object of her calm regard. She tilted her head slightly as though savouring my words. Then she lifted her shoulders in a gesture that was familiar. It said that she did not understand English. In my wandering around the world as my father's brother-in-arms I had acquired a few languages and the rags and tatters of a few more, and a score of dialects. I tried them all on her without success, although she seemed to listen attentively and with great interest.

Finally I looked with helplessness at the blank faces of the others.

"She doesn't understand a word I'm saying."

Dan O'Leary had recovered his composure.

"For that matter neither do we."

"Wouldn't it only be polite to ask her to sit down," suggested Katie.

I drew a chair from beneath the table and positioned it beside mine, and with a gesture invited her to sit down. She inclined her head graciously and smiled, but before sitting, she drew the chair more to the centre of the floor to such a position as to place herself between us and the door.

"I think we'd all better sit down," I told the others. "This is a damned awful situation. She doesn't seem to know any language."

"Maybe she's deaf," said Frankie Casey, who was sitting on the edge of his chair fingering his pipe as though feeling for fractures.

"She heard me all right," I said, with conviction. "She just does not understand."

Polly, leaning back on her pillow, seemed to have withdrawn from us again. Suddenly I remembered that I had an atlas among my books. I rummaged for this, and

finally found it. The others and our visitor watched with great interest as I opened it on the table. I turned to the girl, but found that she was already at my side. I was conscious of a faint perfume as she bent over me to examine the atlas. I showed her a map of Ireland, and by gesture indicated that everybody in the room was associated with that country. Then I made a brave effort to discover what country was her own. I flicked over the pages, pausing at each map and pointing both at her and the page each time. Each time I did this she shook her head with a slight smile of amusement. We reached the end of the atlas without her claiming to be a citizen of any country.

I was about to close the book in despair when she took it from my hands and flicked the pages rapidly back to the beginning, to a page which showed a diagram of our solar system. Then she pointed to herself and pointed upwards.

The implication of what she was trying to convey was so staggering that I gaped at her in astonishment. I felt her faintly amused regard travel over my face. It was apparent that she was enjoying the situation. I stared at the elliptical lines that surrounded our sun, each threaded through a tiny ball representing a planet. I pointed to the circle representing Mars, and she shook her head. Then, with a broadening smile, she crossed behind me and rested her finger on the table on a spot fully two feet from the picture we were looking at. I felt the perspiration damp on my forehead as, with an unsteady finger, I drew an imaginary line from the spot she had indicated to the circle representing our earth, and looked at her enquiringly. She nodded at once, and seemed very happy that at last I understood.

I closed the atlas thoughtfully and turned to the others.

"It appears," I said slowly, "that we have a visitor from another world," realizing at once that it was not

happily phrased to people whose other world was the here-after, but Katie understood.

"You mean she's from the moon?" The last word was hooted.

"From much further away than the moon," I told them. They gazed at the girl in awe.

"No wonder she couldn't understand ye," breathed Dan.

Frankie Casey was not quite convinced. "Surely she couldn't have dropped from the moon or anywhere else. How did she get down here?"

"I don't know," I replied, "but she must have arrived in something. I'm going to have a quick look outside."

Oweneen, whose eyes were fairly popping now, seemed to leap to his feet.

"I'll come with you, Davy."

I looked at his father, and Dan nodded.

"You'd better or he'll bust down the door by the looks of him."

Our oilskins hung outside in the hall, but as I made for the door, the girl came to her feet in one smooth motion and touched me lightly on the arm as I passed her. The half-smile was still on her lips, but her free hand had dropped to the holster-like bulge at her side. It was a gesture that was both significant and alarming. As I stared at her, nonplussed, she motioned me back to the chair, at the same time glancing at the door I was about to open, and shaking her head. It was an unmistakable command not to move from the kitchen.

I returned to the fire. "I think we will wait until morning, Oweneen," I said, but I guessed that they all knew that we were virtually prisoners in the house.

I sat down, feeling very helpless, wondering what on earth we were to do. The girl, however, did not return to her chair. With her hand still resting on the holster at her side, she opened the kitchen door leading to the

hall and looked out cautiously. Then she returned to the centre of the kitchen, leaving the door open and looking at me, indicated the lamp. As clearly and unmistakably as though she had spoken in my ear, I understood that I was to take the lamp and follow her.

Without hesitation, I lifted the heavy metal-stemmed oil lamp from the mantelpiece and went out with her into the hall. She opened the door of the second room and indicated that I should precede her inside. The soft yellow light discovered the three sleeping children locked in a variety of unconscious embraces. I studied the face of the girl as she bent over them. It was oddly impassive, and as she stretched out her hand towards the sleeping girls I was a little apprehensive. However, all she did was to cover one little arm with the top of the blanket, a gesture that was somehow reassuring. She examined the rest of the room briefly and went outside again, holding the door open for me and closing it quietly.

The bare steps of the stairs led upwards into the darkness of the landing. Once more I preceded her upwards to where the damp draughts probed at us and the drip-drip of rainwater falling into half-full vessels made tinkling sounds in the darkness. While we examined the two upstairs rooms, the lamplight must have revealed our miserable plight to our visitor more graphically than words. For a long time she stood looking thoughtfully at the silver lances of the leaks before she turned and descended to the hall.

When we returned to the kitchen I noticed that the others had not moved, as though the darkness in which we had left them had petrified them in various attitudes of anxiety.

"We've made a tour of inspection," I told them, as I replaced the lamp. I did not add that I believed the tour was a security check-up on the part of the girl, as though she wanted to ascertain our numbers and disposition. "I

don't believe we have anything to fear from her," I finished, remembering how she had adjusted the blankets over the sleeping children.

While I was speaking, the girl had crossed to Polly and was looking down at the wrinkled, pallid face.

"Very sick," I told her, involuntarily, as though I were talking to a child.

She looked at me briefly. "Very sick," she repeated, clicking the last two consonants. In the lamplight her face had lost its impassiveness. She seemed genuinely concerned about Polly.

I moved over to her.

"Her name is Polly," I said, articulating slowly.

"Polly," she said, exactly as I had pronounced it.

I took the atlas from the table, and turned to the page which illustrated the elliptical circuit of the earth around the sun. I shadowed the path of the earth with a pencil, and held up one finger to indicate a year.

"One year."

She seemed to understand immediately. Then with both hands I tried to tell her Polly's great age.

"Very old," I said.

"Very old," she echoed, and then to my surprise, "very sick."

She turned from the motionless women, and smiled at me; once again I had the eerie sensation of a voice speaking in my mind requesting my name.

"David," I said.

She repeated it thoughtfully.

Then I introduced the entire company, pointing at them as I repeated their Christian names.

She repeated them all without difficulty, and I thought I saw a half-smile on her lips as she attempted "Oweneen" and "Jackeen". When the introductions were done, she pointed to the hall door, and with that uncanny telepathic power, seemed to enquire about the three children.

I indicated Frankie and Rita, and for the first time the smile of our visitor broadened, to reveal a row of even white teeth. She walked to the rear door then, and undrew the bolt. I had followed her and braced my shoulder against the timbers as they swung inwards. She turned to the others, and once more pointing to herself, said: "Lanadora".

Then she stepped into the howling night, and I closed the door after her.

§ 8

"THE more I think about it," said Dan O'Leary, heavily, "the less sense it makes. I wouldn't be surprised at all to wake up to-morrow morning and find I dreamt the whole bloody thing."

It was four hours or so after the departure of Lanadora, and he and I were keeping vigil in one of the sodden rooms upstairs. The storm still raged outside with unabated fury, and the leaks overhead had increased at an alarming rate as the wind stripped more and more slates off the trembling roof. A smoky storm lantern guttered beside us in the only square yard of comparatively dry timber upstairs. We had emptied all the receptacles through one of the windows, and the dripping rainwater, rattling noisily on their empty metal bottoms, sounded like a score of discordant drums. I was desperately tired and disinclined to talk, but Dan's remark faithfully echoed my own sense of unreality.

"It's an odd situation all right," I agreed.

The lobster-man clicked his tongue. "All these cursed pots and pans will be down in the kitchen to-morrow and this floor will be our roof. There's no hope at all for Polly now, and if Casey's children don't get pneumonia or galloping consumption out of this I'll be surprised." He looked up at the stained ceiling, which was sagging here

and there as if it held a great weight of water. "I wonder who the one will be?" he finished, cryptically. Then: "'Only one to see the end of it,' she said."

Indeed, Polly's prophecy seemed feasible now, and it had been pressing on my own mind like a physical weight. I no longer doubted that the old woman was clairvoyant; she had foretold the severity of this storm with uncanny accuracy, and her behaviour just prior to Lanadora's arrival seemed to indicate that she expected some such visitation. Besides these, there was her strange remark about my own destiny. The future was now locked in her unconscious mind, which at the moment was nearer to Eternity than to us. It was a reasonable assumption that she would not be the one to survive this crisis, and, like Dan, I found myself wondering who the fortunate person would be.

"Maybe 'twas the girl she had in mind," said Dan, out of his musing. "Although she is out there somewhere in the island, she strikes me as being indestructible."

"You can be sure she's not out in the rain," I said. "She must have arrived in some sort of a craft, and I doubt if she is alone."

This presented Dan with a new line for speculation. "How so?"

"It's just a theory of my own. She did not want any of us to go outside until she had checked us over pretty thoroughly. Besides, if whatever she came in had to travel vast distances, it is hardly likely she'd be on her own."

Dan brushed his hand over his eyes. He was as tired as myself. "That's one more bloody thing to worry about."

"As soon as it is light we should be able to see what she came in," I said.

Even in the dull light of the storm lantern I could see that Dan's eyes were lustreless and bloodshot.

"It will be daylight in a few hours, Dan. Why not lie down for a while? There's nothing more we can do up

here, anyway. I'll call Frankie or one of your boys at dawn as soon as it gets light."

"It'll be high water again about then," demurred Dan. "We'll have to watch that. It'll be our greatest danger, I'm thinking."

"It won't be for a few hours more, in any case," I persisted, "and you'll be all the more rested to deal with an emergency when you have a couple of hours' sleep behind you."

He smiled crookedly. "Sure, ye have great arguments, but how about yourself? You're as fagged as me."

"I can keep going a small while yet."

Dan heaved a sigh. "Ye have the youth, lad. I'll go below awhile, so. If you want me you can call me."

I waited until he had settled down before I went out into the kitchen. The lamp was turned down low and the fire was dull. In the corner by the window Rita lay asleep, fully clothed. Katie was nodding in a chair beside Polly's bed. She started at my touch.

"Go and have a sleep, Katie," I told her. "I'll watch awhile. We've finished upstairs for the present."

She made no protest, just squeezed my hand as she stood up, and rolled on the mattress beside Rita. She was asleep almost at once.

I sat on the chair Katie had vacated, full of hopeless thoughts. But for the scarcely perceptible rise and fall of her breast, Polly seemed already dead. I found myself almost envying her the calm detachment of approaching death. Here was a mind oblivious to discouragement, discomfort, or fear. There was an aura of placid tranquillity about the stilled features infinitely removed from my own anxieties and perplexities. Watching her, death did not seem so terrifying, and since this was the ultimate thing that could happen in our chain of misfortunes, I felt oddly consoled. But my anxieties for the others remained. In just a few hours the tide would be full again, and I did

not quite know what to expect. Subconsciously, I suppose, I was beginning to accept the legend of the vanishing island. I was engaged in mentally formulating various tactical measures which might prove useful when the sea began to break over the house, when a knock sounded on the rear door again. This time I was neither startled nor alarmed. I had reached an emotional capacity and could no longer be concerned about anything. I unbolted the door to admit Lanadora.

Neither of the three unconscious women stirred as I shot the bolt again and returned to the chair beside Polly. Lanadora's startling beauty seemed to brighten the dull kitchen, and was at odds with the evidence of our squalor and misery around her. It was strange to think that although she was on the same island, she was completely detached from our crisis. I could not believe that she and those who were with her were in any way threatened or insecure. Having glanced around briefly she sat down facing me, her gloved hands on her knees and her luminous eyes on my face. I was immediately conscious of my lengthening stubble and unkempt hair. Then the humour of the incredible situation struck me and I could not help laughing.

"Well, Lanadora," I said, although I guessed she could not possibly understand what I was saying, "you certainly dropped in on a very desperate situation. Of all the places on earth you had to pick our little island. If I survive this—and at the moment that is a matter for conjecture—I will write about you. But the ironical thing about that is nobody would believe a word of it, and quite frankly I wouldn't blame them." I looked at her face, alive now with interest, as she listened. "You haven't the remotest idea of what I'm talking about," I continued, enjoying the one-sided conversation. "To you I am a strange bearded primitive creature from what you must consider the stone age—an inhabitant of a wild, storm-swept island. But

really, in fairness to us, you must know that it is not always like this. The sun was shining when I first came here, and a lovelier place you could not find. That was a matter of only a few days ago. Now both myself and the others are isolated on this speck of land. Our position is precarious enough, but to deepen the pathos I will tell you that this aforementioned speck is liable to vanish at any moment." I was drunk with weariness, and felt that nothing of what I said made sense. "Yes, my dear, that is the dire prophecy about this doomed island. It's hard to believe, I know, but all sorts of magical things happen in this land of fairies. In just about two hours from now I suspect the sea will rip our roof off and probably smash this house to rubble. As a remote stranger you should find the prospect interesting at least."

I brushed my hand over my burning eyes and found them sore to touch. When I looked up again I thought there was an expression of sympathy or concern on her face, while her eyes seemed larger and brighter than before.

"You are without a doubt," I said, recklessly, "the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in all my life. You would be a complete and absolute riot if you cared to stay down here on this planet. I swear that no man could resist you." I studied the soft curve of her seriously set lips, and for a mad moment wondered what she would do if I kissed them. She would probably reach for that mysterious holster of hers and blast me where I sat. The possibility did not distress me unduly. Such a kiss might be worth dying for. "Under other circumstances I could offer you something to eat, a little caviare, maybe, with champagne, but as things stand I can only offer you my profound admiration." Her eyes were fastened on the signet ring I wore on the third finger of my right hand. It was of solid gold, and belonged to my father. I slipped it off my finger. The monogram on it was the same as my own. "This is a ring," I told her. "Would you care

to see it?" I held it out to her and she took it between her thumb and index finger. "A ring may mean all sorts of things," I explained, "but more often than not it symbolises a pledged love." She looked up calmly, her face inscrutable. I took the ring from her gently and eased it over the gloved finger of her left hand. Our heads were close together when the operation was finished, and the faint perfume of her hair made me a little heady. On a sudden impulse I half-raised myself from the chair and kissed her gently on the mouth. As I drew back, tingling, as from an electric shock, I thought I saw the expression of her eyes change, but whether she was startled, shocked, or angry, I did not know, nor had I time to discover, for at that moment Polly groaned and asked for water.

During the next few moments I forgot Lanadora. I fetched the water from the drinking pail and propped Polly up in my arm. Her sunken lips sucked greedily at the cup as I held it for her.

"Maybe you'd like a drop in it, Polly," I suggested, not sure if she could hear me. She did not answer, and after a moment refused the cup, although she had taken but little. She leaned against my encircling arm and did not seem inclined to lie down again. Lanadora took the cup from my hand and placed it on the table. It was a surprising and friendly gesture. I said "Thank you" aloud, and she inclined her head slightly.

Polly seemed to find great relief sitting in this upright position, and her breathing was easier. Although she did not look directly at me she knew who it was that held her, for once she said "God bless you, Davy." Eventually she lay back on her pillows again and slipped away from us once more. I covered her with the bedclothes. By now the fire had burned down somewhat and I replenished it with peat. Then I went upstairs to find that several of the small receptacles had to be emptied through the window. When I returned to the kitchen Lanadora was

still there, but no longer seated. She was examining the face of the clock on the mantelpiece. My signet ring made a bright band against the blackness of her glove.

I explained by gesture and demonstration how we measured time. I turned the hands of my wrist-watch to represent one hour and on my fingers counted twenty-four of these. Then with the help of a calendar and atlas completed the lesson. I kept talking all the time, and now and then she repeated words I had said, and sometimes whole sentences, with astonishing accuracy. Nor was I in doubt as to whether she understood me. I was about to put the calendar away when she stopped me with a gesture and signalled in that voiceless telepathic way of hers which always produced an eerie sensation as if somebody was speaking inside my head.

Not that I heard anything, but a mental picture of what she wanted seemed to flash on my mind, momentarily suppressing all other pictures and thoughts. I found myself wondering if it were just a one-way system of communication, and had some misgivings about my earlier soliloquies, in case she may have interpreted their meaning by the simple expedient of reading my spoken thoughts. The message this time seemed to ask which figure on the calendar represented to-day. I turned the pages and pointed out the correct date. Immediately she rested her finger on the date following and pointed upwards. I did not need her silent telepathic tingle to realize she was departing the following day. This knowledge had a singularly depressing effect on me.

"A very wise decision," I said, bitterly. I tapped the figure she had indicated and pointed downwards. "By to-morrow it is possible that this house and all in it will be under the sea." Her look of alarm was the first indication I had that she gleaned some idea of what I was talking about, but I felt that my hand gestures had helped. "It would be nice if you could take us all with you, if not

all the way then just across the Sound to the mainland—in fact, anywhere so long as it is off this chip of land.”

She stared at me fixedly, and, as I met her eyes, she glanced fleetingly to where Rita and Katie slept in the shadowed corner, but there was no message from her in my mind, and she did not speak. Instead, she came to her feet and began moving silently about the kitchen, finding something of interest in everything she saw. Her inspection eventually brought her back to the dresser, where my uncovered typewriter stood among the plates. She looked at me enquiringly.

I named the machine, at the same time deliberately conjuring up a mental picture of the thing being operated and reproducing letters on paper. The effect of this effort was a small gesture of impatience, as though she were already familiar with the mechanics of the machine. I tried again.

“The machine is mine. I had hoped to write a book.” This time she was genuinely puzzled. I repeated what I had said, but this time I thought of myself pounding on the keyboard, with a growing stack of typescript at my elbow, over which I merged a picture of a finished book.

This interpretation was naïve enough to cause her to laugh. A light tinkling laughter I was to remember for many a lonely day.

“No ordinary book,” I said, my weariness forgotten in the wonder of her merry eyes. “This was going to be the key to a thousand years of peace.” It was the first time since the beginning of the storm that I had recollected the original reason for my being on the island, and I felt suddenly bitter. “It outlined a plan for permanent peace in a world torn by wars, but it will never be finished now.” I do not think at the time that she understood my words, but my bitterness must have been apparent. She brushed her fingers over the keys of the typewriter and turned

away. For a moment she stood as if in deep meditation, turning the ring on her finger this way and that, then she moved to the rear door.

I opened it for her, but before she left she glanced from me to the ring.

"Good-night, Lanadora," I said, involuntarily.

I thought she murmured my name as she went into the night.

As I returned to the chair I realized that she had not offered to return my ring, and I felt a glow of pleasure. I thought of the warmth Lanadora's finger would impart to the metal and I thought of the unknown craftsman who had made the ring itself. He could never have dreamed how far the product of his skill would travel, and I felt highly amused when I considered that even if I met him I would not be able to tell him where the ring ended up, except that it was represented by a spot on the kitchen table two feet from a cheap atlas.

§ 9

THE proof of the theory that the island was sinking seemed graphically demonstrated shortly after six o'clock that morning. The tide was full then, and, driven by a northerly gale, the sea threw great pillars of water over the cliff to crash on the roof of the house. With the exception of the children and Polly, everybody was pressed into action. Dan's two sons and Frankie Casey were upstairs dealing with the rain and sea water, which was coming through faster than they could take it away. Their footsteps splashed heavily over the kitchen and the living room, knocking slight showers of plaster from the ceilings. Dan, unrefreshed after his short nap, and myself, were occupied with preventing the water from coming under the doors to

invade the living quarters from the hall and the rear door. Rita and Katie, their beads in their hands, provided spiritual as well as practical assistance.

The crisis lasted two hours, and then to our surprise, the rain stopped. By nine o'clock the wind had dropped to a stiff breeze. We had become so accustomed to the howling gale that this period of comparative quiet was incredible. We were more suspicious than relieved when we went out of doors to verify the miracle for ourselves. The sky was still leaden and low, and the mainland was just a dark mass through the haze over the sea, which was raging still like a great cauldron of boiling milk. After our long hours of confinement, the breeze was as invigorating as wine. We stood about breathing it in, our spirits rising by the minute. Frankie Casey's waistcoat flapped wildly like stunted wings endeavouring to lift his great bulk off the ground. Dan's expression was inscrutable; he looked neither anxious nor relieved. Oweneen and Jackeen had accepted as a fact that the bad weather was permanently over, and they seemed vastly pleased. Rita Casey, who had not moved beyond the door, was watching her husband with shining eyes. Katie had remained with Polly and the children.

I was the first to see the strange craft. I had stepped out a bit to examine the roof—without success, for the ground sloped rapidly downwards towards the cliff—when I saw the great globular machine about one hundred yards below the house and a little to the rear. It was like a great shining fungus that had sprung up magically from the heather. It was more than twelve feet high and perhaps three times that diameter, reflecting the dull light on its polished surface. A haze of spindrift floating between it and ourselves seemed to deepen the awesome mystery of its appearance.

My astonished expression brought the others to my side, and we formed a tight knot of stupefaction on the crown of the island.

"Merciful God!" said Dan, making four slow rolling syllables.

"That must be the yoke she came in," said Frankie.

"'Tis big enough, surely," said Oweneen. "Wait until they see this over from the mainland."

"I don't believe they can see it to-day," I said. "And it won't be here to-morrow." I told them then of Lanadora's visit during the night and how she had announced to me her imminent departure.

"I was wondering," Oweneen said wistfully, when I had finished, "if she would take any passengers with her."

His father looked at him swiftly, but for once made no caustic comment.

"The mystery is," said Frankie, as if Oweneen had not spoken, "why the thing came down here at all."

"I believe they had no option," I surmised. "It appears to me that they were very lucky this island was here, otherwise they might have landed in the sea."

As we watched, we saw the familiar figure of Lanadora come from behind the space ship. She saw us at once and walked deliberately through the heather towards us. I felt my heart beat faster at the memory of her lips on mine. It seemed now that I had known her all my life, but even then I did not suspect that the image of this girl from outer space was to haunt me for many a lonely day.

"Fine and bright she's looking this morning," commented Dan. He was watching me closely. "A fine slip of a girl entirely, with beauty to turn any man's heart to water."

Fine and bright indeed she certainly seemed, in contrast to her previous visits. While she was yet some distance away she lifted her hand in salutation, and was smiling when she joined us.

Oweneen was restless with excitement.

“Will ye ask her Davy if we can see the yoke yonder?”

The girl wore no cap to-day, and her short hair stirred around in the wind. For me she symbolised the freshness of the morning. Indeed, I had the illusion of a sudden brightness at her approach. She looked us over smilingly, and I thought that for a moment her eyes held mine with a wistful intimacy. I noticed that she still wore my ring.

I smiled back at her, and nodding towards the strange craft, concentrated on it in flight from the island.

“I was telling them you are going away soon.”

She nodded her head and repeated the word “soon”.

I indicated the ship again. “Could we inspect your space craft?”

She thought for a moment, and then shook her head regretfully.

Oweneen, whose soul was in a pair of wide adoring eyes, turned to me. “Will you ask her if she would take some of us to wherever she is going?”

Again Dan looked at him sharply, opened his mouth to say something, but evidently thought better of it.

“You’re joking, surely?” I asked the young man, my eyes on his father.

Oweneen shook his head. “Jackeen and I have been talking this over. As true as God is to be my Judge, we’d take a chance this very minute—that is—” he paused and looked sheepishly at his father—“if you say it’s all right, father.”

“After all”, said Jackeen, speaking for the first time, “what is there here for us only a home on a shifting rock and a poor living on the sea, and neither prospect of marriage or money or future. Sure we may as well go as stay here to rot in the rain and die old men before we have a chance to live.”

“How will you know it won’t be from the fire into the frying pan,” I asked them, “even if by a miracle the girl should consent to take you?”

"If she's an example of the people there," said Oweneen, "it'll be like heaven, surely."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know how to ask her," I began to explain, when Dan exploded:

"Ask her!"

"But——"

"It won't do any harm. And 'tis a fair question."

I shrugged, and turned to Lanadora. How much she understood of the conversation I did not know, but she seemed amused at the fervour of the youths. Because I was very interested in her reaction to Oweneen's request and also to ensure that she would not misunderstand, I was very careful about communicating that question to her. I pointed to Dan's sons, then to herself and the space craft, and mentally concentrated on all four leaving the island together.

Even before I was finished her eyes had widened with surprise. Instantly I had the impression that she was checking my question. Pronouncing the youths' names with astounding accuracy, she waved her hand to the ship and swept it over her and upwards in a gesture of depicting rapid flight.

"Yes!" I cried aloud. "They want to know if you will take them with you wherever you come from." Even now I was more interested in her reactions rather than her answer. In fact my imagination boggled at the picture of these two young men leaving their island home for a distant and unknown destination in the sky. I think we must all have held our breath while she considered her answer. She looked fixedly at Dan's sons, then lifting her shoulders, slightly turned away. I had the impression that she was not very certain of herself. It was neither a refusal nor acceptance. There was no clue to her thoughts in my mind as we watched her walk towards the space ship and disappear around the side of it.

Oweneen clutched me by the arm, his eyes fever-bright.

"What did she say?"

"I don't know," I told him, truthfully. "I don't believe she made any direct answer."

"She didn't say no."

"Nor did she say yes," I reminded him. "We'll only have to wait and see."

Frankie Casey brushed his damp moustache. "I got the idea she must ask somebody else."

"That was my own impression," I told them.

Dan cleared his throat. "I'll give that young lady credit for more sense," he said. "She'll know two numbskulls when she sees them." He looked at his sons with withering scorn. "A lot of bloody use the two of ye would be on the moon." Then he tramped off towards the house.

Frankie Casey eyed the lads with unusual severity.

"God give ye sense," he said, and it did not sound like a prayer. "Have ye any thought for himself, a man who was father and mother to ye? Would you leave him desolate now when he has neither chick nor child nor a roof over his head? If ye want to go away what's wrong with America or Canada, or England for that matter, where ye could earn enough to keep him in comfort in his old age. But no—they places are too close at hand. Nothing nearer than a star will do ye. 'Tis a pity ye're not there now crying ye're eyes out to come home to the bit of rock that was good enough for yer grandfather and yer father, but not good enough for me two young cocks!"

Oweneen and his brother said nothing, just studied with great intensity the heather at their feet. They were neither crestfallen nor ashamed, but an innate respect for their elders did not permit the smallest retort. Yet Frankie waited, as though expecting one, and not receiving any, followed Dan indoors, leaving the three of us alone.

After a moment of indecision, Oweneen looked up uncertainly. His fresh face was round and appealing.

"I suppose you think we're daft, Davy?"

I studied the two eager faces. The thought struck me that such expressions must have been worn by the early intrepid men who first looked beyond the rim of unknown horizons.

"No, Oweneen, I don't think you are daft, but I doubt very much if either of you will be taken anywhere. Even if the girl were willing, I think it would be foolhardy to go to a place of which you know absolutely nothing, especially since there would be little prospect of your returning if you changed your mind."

"Look!" said Jackeen, taking in the boiling sea and lowering sky with a sweep of his hand. "It could be no worse than here."

"You are referring to conditions of climate," I reminded him. "There are more important conditions than weather conditions. Little considerations of social existence, of legislature or laws, if you like, that imprison the mind."

Jackeen nodded towards the space ship. "She's no slave."

"Maybe not," I agreed. "But is she a typical citizen? I'd imagine that not all of her race would be privileged to make such a journey. She may represent one stratum of the social life in whatever world she comes from. There may be the other extreme. You have no way of knowing the conditions that await you there. A decision to go with her—to change worlds, in fact—is so irrevocable that no amount of thought on it could be considered too great. . . . Besides, both of you are very young."

Oweneen had listened to me with the greatest of attention, but when I had finished I felt I had made little impression on his resolve.

"Jackeen and myself have thought about it, and we realize that 'tis a very serious business altogether. In fact, a man could think about this for ever. But if you want to get anywhere there must be an end to thinking some time, and there must be a 'yes' or a 'no'. Well, we'd

like to go." He lifted his head suddenly and turned away, a dream in his eyes and the wind in his hair. Already there seemed about him an air of irrepressible speed.

"In any case," supplemented his brother, "suppose when we did reach this place, we found things were even worse than here, it would make no difference in the long run. We'll die there just as sure as in this place. Life in this world or any other world will go like that——" he snapped his fingers. "But we'd have reached for the stars, anyway, and would see things that nobody else on this earth would have seen, and I believe that would be something worth suffering or even dying for. Far better, anyway, than wasting the years and waiting for eternity."

Oweneen had fixed shining eyes on his brother, and he turned a triumphant expression on me, as much as to say that there was an argument to end all arguments.

"That's the whole thing in a nutshell," he said, "and I couldn't have said it better myself."

I felt incapable of arguing further, nor did I have any sense of defeat. Indeed, the pioneering spirit so clearly demonstrated by these young men was stimulating and exciting. Very weakly I proffered my last effort to dissuade them.

"There's your father?"

Oweneen thought a moment, his face softening.

"Ah, surely there is. We thought about him, too, and we are hoping he will come with us. But he won't stand in our way. If he don't come, sure, after all, we'd only be parted for a small while."

For a moment I thought that Oweneen did not realize the implications of their decision to go with the space ship.

"There will be no coming back, Oweneen," I told him, urgently. "You will probably never see your father again."

Both of them looked at me in surprise. "We mightn't see him in this life," said Jackeen, "but we'll see him in the next."

Once more I was face to face with the explicable dual existence of these islanders, who always seemed to have one leg in this life and the other in Eternity.

"He'll have wings then," said Oweneen, smiling.

"Stoking he'll be, surely," offered Jackeen.

Both of them laughed, and, watching them, I felt suddenly envious and very old.

§ 10

THE weather grew a little brighter towards noon and the curtain of cloud lifted sufficiently high off the sea to permit a glimpse of the mainland. It was just a vague dark shadow, fringed with the boiling Sound, but its appearance was heartening, and our spirits rose by the minute. None of us doubted that the worst was over and that all we had to do was to wait until the sea subsided to have the comfort and assistance of our friends across the way. Katie believed it possible for Polly to have the consolation of the last rites of the Church, although the others did not share her hopes in this respect. The old woman was sinking fast, and it was clear that her death was a matter of hours.

"If it cleared another small bit," Katie surmised, "we could signal for Father Daly."

"I suppose he'd swim across," said Dan, sarcastically. "For the love of God have sense, girl! It'll be another two or three days at least before a boat could live in that sea."

"Even so," Katie persisted, "Father Daly would do it for Polly."

"He might try at that," agreed Dan, "and I wouldn't want his death on my hands."

We were gathered in the kitchen after the midday meal, having consolidated our position somewhat by replenishing our fuel supply from the heart of the sodden stock outside

and effecting what repairs we could do to the roof. None of us had broached the subject of Oweneen and Jackeen's decision, although it must have been uppermost in all our minds. The two young men were inseparable and held a continuous whispered conversation. I noted that Dan viewed them from time to time with growing impatience, and it seemed that an eruption was inevitable. It came immediately after the discussion on sending a signal for Father Daly.

"Isn't it strange," said Dan, glowering at his sons, "that one good man would risk his life to get on to this island while two nincens would do the same thing to get off it."

The brothers broke off a whispered conversation.

"I'm talking to the two of ye," thundered their father. "Yer sitting around there all day like two old hens cackling, and bloody fantastic notions in yer heads."

It was remarkable how much the brothers resembled each other in their astonishment. The rest of us said nothing, realizing that this issue between father and sons was inevitable and had to be resolved some time. The boys, however, seemed in no hurry to join the issue. They simply stared at their parent until he erupted again.

"D'ye hear me talking to ye?"

"Well," said Oweneen, squaring his shoulders, his round face suddenly solemn, "'tisin't that we want to be rid of ye at all. 'Tis just that we want to live for a change. Look at the two of us, will ye, father——" He drew attention to himself and his brother with a dramatic sweep of his hand. "We've never even been beyond Dunfoy. We've seen nothing. How other people live and what they do is something we know nothing about. Now there is a chance to see strange people and strange places, and myself and Jackeen are game for it." He brushed the back of his big hand over his forehead. "In the long run it won't make much of a difference where we are, since

we must all go the one way home. But we're not foolish enough to think that it's all sealed and signed and that we are going to go. We're only saying that if we get the chance we would go like a shot. In fact, if the chance is there I think we should all go. We'd all be together then. 'Twould be a new life for us all." His voice was suddenly passionate. "God Almighty! father, it's only half an existence here, and ye all know that better than me because you've lived with it longer. So I say let's all go if we can."

Dan had not attempted to interrupt his son, and under other circumstances his expression would be comical, so astounded did he look. It must have been the first time that one of his sons contested any issue with him. As for the rest of the company, Katie and Rita shared a common expression of horror, Frankie Casey looked stoically at the fire, while the children playing under the table were unaware of the crisis that had grown around them like an electric storm. For myself, I felt a growing admiration for Oweneen. The boy had spirit and courage. I thought it a pity that he and his brother could not go to their star, for I felt even then that Lanadora would be bound to decline their request.

Dan took quite a few minutes to collect his thoughts, and very uncertain thoughts they must have been, for he attempted to give them utterance several times before any coherent sounds emerged. It was to Frankie Casey that he addressed his first coherent remarks.

"Did ye ever hear anything like that in all yer born days?"

Frankie did not look up. "They're not too big yet to have their ears reddened."

"No, Frankie," said Dan, "that's no good any more. They're men now, and they should have sense enough to know their own minds. It boils down to this, that they're not happy here and never will be again as long as this canker is in them. If it isn't the moon it'll be some place

else." He looked at the boys, his expression somewhat softer. "Maybe there is a deal of sense in what they are doing. Life is not easy here, nor is it comfortable living in the teeth of the wind and the crest of the wave, but this is the only life we know. Maybe in your place I would want to do the self-same thing as ye, but I am set in my ways and at an age that hates change. But ye are young and free men." His voice was suddenly appealing. "The thing that bothers me is not that ye want to go but that ye don't know where ye are going. For God knows ye are still my sons, and your happiness is of concern to me." He looked at me with tragic eyes. "Did she say she'd take them?"

"She didn't say so."

"Did she refuse?"

"She didn't say anything at all. I don't even know if she understood."

"Is there any way we can find out what her country is like—or her world, wherever it is. Is it better or worse than our own?"

"I don't know if I can find out these things," I replied, "but I could try, and even if I got an answer I wouldn't be quite sure of what she was trying to tell me. I doubt very much if there is a chance of the boys going, but if there is, it must be taken on the assumption that not only is the trip itself a gamble, but also the manner of life they find at the end of their journey."

"D'ye think they're daft?" asked Dan, seriously.

I looked at him steadily. "I do not."

"I was thinking you wouldn't," said Dan, and I thought that for a moment his eyes strayed to my ringless hand. "Would you go if you could?"

"I would, if it were possible," I replied, without hesitation, "but I can't. If this were six or even three months from now I'd be more anxious to go than Oweneen and Jackeen here. But I have been set a task that I must fulfil before I go anywhere else."

I could see that he had a mind to ask me what that task was, and I told them that in my capacity as mercenary soldier I had seen man turned to beast. I had seen others, shining spirits by comparison, snuffed out as a candle is snuffed out. I had seen death come from the sea and the sky and from the earth, and had steeled myself to it. But like my father I had been haunted by the helpless, hopeless, tragically mature faces of very young children, hungry, desolate and forgotten in a world gone mad. And I believed that my father had devised a plan that would make war an impossibility. That plan he not only imparted to me but had charged me to set it down on paper. Before I could go anywhere, his formula for a thousand years of peace must be written down and bequeathed to a sick world.

All this I told them, feeling their eyes on my face and their sympathy reach out and warm me. When I finished, Katie picked up the poker and prodded a hole in the red-hot peat.

"It'll have God's blessing," she said.

"Or nothing will," supplemented Rita.

Women alone, I thought, held the secret of peace in their motherly hearts. . . .

By late afternoon it became apparent to us that the clearance of the weather was but a temporary prelude to a continuation of the storm. The mainland disappeared again, and the wind lifted in recurring gusts, until at dusk it blew with steady savagery over our heads. It did not quite kill our rising hopes, for the rain still held off.

After supper we sat around the stove listening uneasily to the strengthening wind. The children had been put to bed, but none of us felt like retiring. We were like the remnants of a besieged garrison awaiting the final assault. Whether the lull of the morning had dulled our memories

of the wind or whether the renewed onslaught was stronger than before, was at the start difficult to tell, but after a few hours we were in no doubt that this time the storm was coming from the north with unprecedented fury. It literally shrieked at us through every cranny and crack. The rush and wrench of it was everywhere, and it seemed that it must slowly pull the house to pieces.

"I'm sure this is the night," said Katie, suddenly, from the depths of the silence that gripped us, and it was strange that I was the only one who did not understand her meaning.

"It could well be," said Frankie Casey, absently, and Rita, seated beside him with her inevitable knitting needles, moaned slowly and leaned her head against his shoulder. Instinctively his big arm encircled her: "Sure, what am I sayin', we've had worse than this in days gone by." He looked across at Dan: "Hadn't we, Dan?"

The lobster man took his pipe from his mouth and studied the blackened bowl. "I suppose we had at that, Frankie, but 'tis the way I've forgotten it."

"A poor memory you always had," retorted Casey, a little warmly. "The worst is over us now. If the rain holds off we'll be all right, and this will blow itself out before morning."

"If the island don't sink to-night," said Katie, as if speaking out of a trance, "it'll stay on top of the sea for ever."

Dan nodded across at her. "It don't have to sink to finish us. By now there's not a slate left in the roof, I'd say, and there's a deluge in that wind, or else I'm deaf. Besides that, in an hour or so it'll be high tide again." He met Frankie's furious gaze calmly. "'Tis best they know, Frankie. 'Tis a bad time to be softening blows."

Rita sobbed again, and then in a broken voice: "Although 'twas better to-day, I knew deep down in my heart that it would come to this. I could feel the island sinking."

"And I never knew Polly to be wrong in a prophecy."

Katie's voice held the same monotonous lifelessness. "There's only one of us to see the end of this."

In spite of the glowing stove the kitchen seemed suddenly chilled. Even Oweneen and Jackeen, buoyed up a moment before by the prospect of leaving the island, were now pale and anxious.

"Mother of God!" said Oweneen, suddenly, "wouldn't it be just our luck to have the island go down before to-morrow."

His brother said nothing, but Dan lifted his chin like a stag scenting the wind. "So 'tis yourself you're thinkin' of, Oweneen. No thought of what might happen to other people, as long as you can shift your backside to some five-pointed star."

Oweneen coloured. "'Tisn't that at all, father——" Then realizing that no explanation would be adequate, he lifted his broad shoulders—"I suppose I spoke out of turn."

But I was very thankful he had spoken, for he had inadvertently planted a thought in my mind that instantly germinated and grew. Before that moment I admit I was infected by their superstition even to the point of believing that the island was settling in the sea. Perhaps it was the strain of the past days or the gentle infection of their talk, but to me the hurtling wind outside meant tragedy for all as surely as though we were awaiting a direct hit from a high explosive bomb. Polly's prophecy was starkly fixed in my mind, and I resented it bitterly. It was the only unkind thought I had about the dying woman. If she had foreseen the deaths of all but one of the present company she should have told them about it while they had a chance to leave the island the night Cathal O'Riain left for the mainland. Or else if she thought the events of her dream were immutable, she should have remained silent. From the little that I had learned about Polly I knew that she was wise and good and that the well-being and happiness of those people who remained of her small realm would

be of great concern to her. For this reason I could not reconcile her past reputation with the frightful torture of her prophecy—unless—and this was the thought that had fired my brain—unless it had some interpretation other than the one we had put on it. That such might be the case I never considered until Oweneen spoke.

“You’re wrong about Polly’s prophecy, Katie,” I said, speaking involuntarily.

In an instant every eye was turned on me. Katie looked as if I had struck her across the face. I turned to Dan and Casey.

“You two were there when she made her prophecy. What did she say?”

“I’d hardly be mistaken about it,” said Dan.

I felt a growing sense of impatience. “I’m not saying you would. I’m asking you what she said that first night?”

Frankie and himself exchanged a puzzled glance before he answered me. “She told Cathal O’Riain not to tarry and that she didn’t see him in her dream and that he had his own life to live. Then she said to Frankie here that the storm would last a week and many a long week and only one of us would see the end of it.”

“That’s what she said,” agreed Frankie, “and she said, too, that we’d never see the likes o’ this.”

“That’s correct,” I said. “I heard her, too. Now, what way did you interpret her prophecy?”

“Sure it only has one meanin’,” said Dan. “You wouldn’t want much sense——”

“How long have you known Polly?” I interrupted him.

Dan was growing impatient now. “All my life, man and boy.”

“What kind of a woman was she?” I was speaking of her as though she were already dead.

Dan’s swift impatient glance drew the attention of the company to my foolishness. However, he decided to humour me.

"She was a queen in every way."

"Have you ever known her to harm anybody?"

"Never a solitary soul."

"Did she ever speak evil of anybody?"

"Only when evil walked on two legs," said Dan.

"Was she the kind of person that would cause unnecessary pain?"

"She only eased pain," said Dan.

"Then she must have been a pretty wonderful person," I said.

Dan nodded his head. "She was all that."

"Then if she was all that," I concluded, "there must be some other meaning to her prophecy."

A hurricane gust of wind at the window dramatically punctuated my sentence.

If I had committed sacrilege the eyes turned on me could not have been more outraged.

"Examine it yourselves," I invited them. "If Polly had seen our deaths in a dream do you think she would have deliberately kept silent until Cathal O'Riain's boat was gone and it was too late to shift even the children to the safety of the mainland? Was Polly the type of person who would doom her own people when they could be saved?"

They stared at me in stunned silence, the outrage draining from their faces as my words sank home.

"She wasn't that type of woman at all," said Dan, after a moment.

"I believe that," I agreed. "Therefore there must be some other meaning to her prophecy, and I think I know what it is." As I looked at the tense faces around me I did not know for sure whether or not I believed what I was about to say. "I feel now that I am the one to see the end of this crisis here, but not for a moment do I see your deaths in the picture."

"Where are we, then?" asked Casey, as though I held a crystal ball in my hand.

I met the eyes of each of them, feeling my spine tingle with emotion.

"I believe you are going with Oweneen and Jackeen with that girl outside."

My theory fell among them like a paralysing electric shock. Nobody moved while the echo of my words hung in the air. Then :

"I can just see myself," said Frankie, with a short, unconvincing laugh.

Nobody else joined in his laughter. Surprisingly, Oweneen and Jackeen said nothing at all. At length Dan breathed deeply : "'There might be something in what you say about us putting the wrong meanin' on Polly's words, but again there might be a third meaning."

"There might be," I conceded, "but I can't see it."

"No more than I can see myself flying through space," said Frankie.

Dan turned on him at once. "You might have no choice, Frankie."

Neither of the women said a word, and Jackeen and Oweneen were looking at their father as if they were beholding a god.

§ II

IN the solitude of my island home I have often wondered which of several factors was most influential in the fateful decisions made on that particular night. It could well be that fear, coupled with superstition, was the main motivating force. But then it could have been the same adventurous curiosity which certainly animated Jackeen and Oweneen, or it might be the beauty and magical charm of Lanadora that drew the islanders away from familiar things, however insecure, and launched them on the vastness of the unknown. Perhaps I would be accurate in saying that it was a combination of all these things. Of

one thing only was I certain—Dan O'Leary's sons were alone in their enthusiasm for a solar journey before the rain came.

But I am a little ahead of myself, for immediately after I had proffered my theory concerning Polly's prophecy, Lanadora joined our company. Oweneen let her in. Indeed, he had bounded from his chair for that privilege. This time she wore a cloak of the same material as her tightly-fitting costume, and was braced by a complicated harness of straps encircling her waist and passing between and under her breasts. Once again she wore her woollen cap. She seemed surprised to find that Oweneen had admitted her, and her eyes swept the company until they met mine. Then she gave a little intimate smile that set my heart pounding. On her way around the table she paused at Polly's bed and looked for a few moments on the livid face. I placed a chair for her, but with a gesture she indicated that she would prefer to stand. There was an air of urgency about her to-night, as if seconds were precious.

Once again in the same manner she had used that afternoon, she announced her imminent departure. Then she pointed to Oweneen and Jackeen.

"She's willing to take the two boys, Dan," I translated, unnecessarily.

Dan said nothing for a moment, then he slowly came to his feet and faced his two sons, while a sudden silence enveloped us.

"My only concern is for your happiness, lads, but ye've backed me into a corner. If I don't let ye go, ye'll be eating your hearts out for the rest of your lives and be no good for anyone. On the other hand, if ye go, ye are lost to me and to all you've known here for as long as ye live. 'Tis for yourselves alone to decide, and that's the sad thing about it, because there's not a decent head between the two of ye."

The two boys exchanged a glance, and I could see that in this fateful moment they had not been shaken in their resolve to go. No words were exchanged by them, but I had a feeling that a deep tacit message passed between them. Oweneen seemed elected spokesman. He bowed stiffly and awkwardly to Lanadora.

"We'll go with you, m'am, and be very thankful." He made to shake her hand, thought better of it, and finally hid it behind his back. Then he faced his father.

"There's one thing Jackeen and me would like, father. We'd like you to come with us."

"I know ye would," said Dan, "but as I told you before, I'm too old."

"Not in years, father," said Oweneen, his face a round circle of appeal. "'Tis the hard life on this island has made you old-looking. Away from it you'd be as spry as a boy. Yerra what's in it anyway, but a span of time? The important thing is that we'd be together, and you'd have somebody to look after you twenty years from now, when your strength is gone and ye need looking after."

Dan made an unsuccessful attempt to hide his emotion. His Adam's apple leaped once as he swallowed.

"Will ye listen to head o' knowledge talking about taking care of me," he appealed to us. "He'll be put to the pin of his collar to take care of himself."

Jackeen spoke across to me. "Would ye ask her if she'd take me father too, Davy?"

Dan's eyes met mine, and I thought he was beginning a negative shake of his head, when the house seemed to tremble under the impact of a hurricane gust, and with it came the rain, careening suddenly against the glass like pebbles, and continuing loud and sustained like the roll of countless drums. For that moment the storm dominated our thoughts, overriding our personal problems, decisions and perplexities with its utter savagery. I saw Lanadora glance upwards, apprehension in her eyes, and at that

moment the children in the other room began to shriek in terror.

Rita and Frankie raced across the kitchen and out into the hall, leaving the door gaping to breathe upon us the strong chill breath of the storm. Katie stood pale and rigid, with both hands on the mantelpiece, as though to steady it. The Caseys returned almost as once, bringing the terrified children with them.

"The rain's coming through the ceiling inside," Frankie announced, "and one more thing"—he set the children he carried on the floor—"the sea is knocking on the door. There's inches of water in the hall."

"'Twould be about time now for it," said Dan, soberly. "The tide is high."

"Not for an hour yet," said Casey.

The leaping flame of the oil lamp accentuated the hollows of Dan's bearded cheeks. "'Tis backed by a strong wind, too."

"Ay," agreed Frankie, "but there's more than the wind in it. The island is going down. Did ye not feel the house keel over that time?"

Panic was written in the white faces of the women and whimpering children.

"It was only the first shock of the rain," I said, to steady them.

Frankie's eyes were wide. "The first shock?" he said. "The first of many shocks."

As if to substantiate his words, a terrific blast of wind gripped us, there was a sudden sense of pressure, and the open kitchen door slammed shut like a pistol shot. Katie moaned, and put a hand to the glittering oil lamp. Rita, on her knees, had managed to enclose all her children in her embrace. I found Lanadora's eyes on me. In the dark luminous depths of them there seemed to be a world of compassion for our plight. She indicated the entire company with a gesture, and pointed upwards.

"You can all go now," I told them, with growing excitement. "She is willing to take you all if you are willing to go."

Nobody moved for a fraction of a second, and in that short time I saw Frankie Casey question his wife with his eyes and Dan look at his sons. Katie turned her eyes fleetingly on Polly, as forgotten up to this as though she were already dead and buried.

Rita gazed up at me from her knees. "What is it like up there?"

I was tempted to reassure her there and then, but that would burden me with the responsibility of their decision. I directed her question to Lanadora.

"Your world," I said, pointing upwards, "what is it like?" I thought of trees and rivers and cities such as I knew them.

She nodded her head immediately and said something I did not understand, but I had a mental picture of snow-white buildings, tall and graceful, and the broad sweep of great rivers fringed with verdant green.

"Her world doesn't seem very different to ours," I told them. Then a thought struck me. I concentrated my thoughts on the havoc of total warfare. "Are there wars on your planet?"

"No wars," she said in English, with surprising clarity.

"Then it must be heaven," said Katie.

Dan gripped my arm. "What do you think, Davy?"

"About what?"

"About all of us going?"

"It seems a safe bet, Dan. To remain would be risky for all of us."

"I don't want to lose my sons," said Dan, almost fiercely.

"Nor me the children," said Rita.

"Then you'll need somebody to take care of you and them," said Frankie, solemnly.

I glanced at Katie, and she half-smiled.

"I should have more sense at my age. I'd like to go to keep house for you, Davy, but what about the poor creature there in the bed? Somebody must stay here."

So completely had we forgotten the dying woman that we stared at her now as though she were a sudden intruder. The marble white figure was unconscious of the storm of elements and human decisions that raged around her.

"The poor lamb is nearly gone from us," said Katie.

I knew then what I had to do and say.

"Well, Katie, Frankie and his family belong together, and so do Dan and his boys. That leaves only you and me. For myself, even if I wanted to go—even if Polly were dead and buried—I would have to remain here, so I'll stay with Polly."

I think it was then I knew positively that Lanadora could understand everything I said. I heard the sharp intake of her breath and found her wide eyes turned on me in dismay. I believe that my father's task alone could not have held me then, but coupled with the fate of two women, one solitary and one dying, I was strong enough to stifle my own desire.

"There is work I am pledged to finish," I said to Lanadora, feeling that to her alone the explanation was due.

"You'll be kilt if you stay," said Katie.

"No I won't," I assured her. "Remember the prophecy, one to see the end of the crisis—I seemed to have known from the start that it must be me."

"If you don't go, none of us will," said Dan, suddenly.

"Have you forgotten what Polly said, Dan?" I asked him. "You can't escape your destiny. A new world—that's your destiny—the first pilgrims to another planet. To write a formula for peace—that's my destiny, and who knows, we may meet again."

Neither Dan or Katie said anything more, but I could see the slow tears in her eyes. On an impulse I took

Lanadora's hand. It was warm beneath the material of her glove. My ring still encircled her finger. "My father's pledge holds me here, Lanadora. Whatever your world is like it will be all the richer for having taken these people. Treat them well." As I was speaking I was conscious of her great eyes, still darkly tragic, and the soft contour of cheeks and lips. With an effort I fought down an impulse to take her in my arms. A sense of irretrievable loss weighed heavily upon me.

"In the name of God," I beseeched them, "if you're going, go quickly."

§ 12

THE farewells of that night were among the most poignant and heart-searing of my life. I had known these people but a few weeks, yet it seemed to me that they had always been an integral part of my life and closer to me than any other humans I had known, with the solitary exception of my father. His way of life, and consequently mine, had been such that our own companionship sufficed. We made no lasting friendships or alliances. Indeed, I believe now that my parent's Quixotic efforts at rectifying the ills of the world by taking up arms for the underdog earned for him and me more contempt than affection, and brought both of us a full share of hard blows. These simple island people of Innishios were the first real friends I had ever known. They had accepted me without question and made me one of their own, and I may as well say it now—although I have known many women, mostly the tragic, pitiful, parasitical shoots that spring up in the wake of the shears of war, the night I kissed Lanadora was the first selfless salute I had given to any woman. All I wanted, perhaps without quite knowing it, was peace, companionship, and the love of a woman I had found on this speck of land, and now it was all to be taken away.

Before they left that night, each of the islanders made some form of Will, bequeathing their pitifully small possessions to relatives and friends. I put all their effects into separate envelopes and placed them in Dan's strong-box—their last link with the world was severed.

Only fragmentary pieces of our mumbled good-byes remain with me now, halting and scarcely articulate but deeply moving, given against the dramatic background of the most terrifying gale I had ever known.

Rita, preoccupied with preparing her children for their great adventure, found time to cry over my hand. Frankie Casey, a little awed and uncertain under the tremendous weight of his responsibility, squeezed into my arm a wealth of affection. Oweneen and Jackeen constantly lamented my decision to stay, but were at the same time elated and excited at the prospect of plunging into space. They were very young. Dan O'Leary's "We'll miss you, Davy," almost unmanned me by its genuine warmth. In all my life I had never been missed before.

"I'm sorry I cannot come, Dan."

"I know that, Davy. You've set yourself a task, and 'tis your nature to abide by a promise given, but isn't it strange now the feeling is on me that we will meet again."

For a fleeting moment, as I looked into his moist eyes, I had a similar conviction.

"I'll pray for that, Dan," said I, who had never prayed in his life.

Katie cried unashamed, and clung to me. All I could understand of her tearful parting was the conviction that I would surely be killed, and her thoughtful consideration for Polly. . . . "If the weather gets better and by some miracle the both of ye are alive, try to get a priest for Polly. . . ."

And so they left me, moving into the tortured night. Significantly, they went in groups: first Dan and his sons, then Frankie Casey and his little clan, and finally, Katie,

looking tall and tragic in her black shawl. Lanadora preceded them, without a backward glance at me, and I was left alone with a dying woman, in a trembling house. Listlessly I moved around the kitchen, not yet fully conscious of my loss, but with an empty pain in my heart, as though I were suddenly bereaved, just as on that day—so long ago now—when I held my father's shattered body in my arms and knew that he was dead. My boots splashed in the water that was invading the kitchen from the hall. I touched the pathetic wisps of curtaining at the window, unmindful now of the vicious tattoo of rain outside. I turned up the wick of the oil lamp slightly to dispel the shadows, and unconsciously wound the little clock on the mantelpiece. Its measured tick seemed extraordinarily amplified and insistent, even above the screaming wind. It seemed to infer that Time would assuage all things. I adjusted the damper of the stove and replenished it with peat. Finally, I ended up beside Polly's bed. Once more I found myself morbidly envying her, her detachment from all things. The greying face was strangely calm and serene, the wrinkles seemed entirely smoothed out, and the countenance held a solemn dignity. Both her hands were outside the bedclothes, her fingers entwined in each other and in a Rosary. Polly seemed to be praying to her God with all the calm confidence of a saint. She seemed to have grown taller, too, for the twin mound made by her feet was surprisingly low down in the bed. Death was beginning to rejuvenate this qucenly woman. I felt a strange comfort in her presence. As long as she breathed, I thought, I was not entirely solitary. There was nothing I could do for her except wait. I thought of Katie's instructions concerning the priest. It seemed to matter very little. My own conception of God could not or would not find a blemish on the soul of this woman. If heaven were denied her, then surely it would be denied all souls.

I was still standing beside Polly when a loud rapping sounded on the door. I knew at once who it would be even before I withdrew the bolt to admit Lanadora. The rain glistened on her clothing and clung to her face. I refastened the door, and then, even as I turned around, we were locked in each other's arms, her lips seeking and holding mine and our bodies crushed together. How long we stood like that I will never know, but it seemed that this moment was the thrilling reality, and all other things, the storm, the islanders, the uncertainty, had never been. I discovered that Lanadora was not the ethereal, mysterious visitor from the unknown, but a warm, vibrant woman, loving, and—have I not said it before—beloved. In that moment, too, my father's task appeared monstrously unreasonable. I would freely have ignored it, and gladly left the world without his peace formula, but over Lanadora's shoulder I could see the colourless face of Polly, and I knew I could never leave her to die alone.

At length very gently I released Lanadora's arms from around my neck. Tears had merged with the rain on her face and cheeks, and a spot on one of them showed red from my beard. She never looked more beautiful. I lifted one of her gloved hands and kissed her finger.

"I love you, Lanadora, and I always will, no matter where you are. I'd go with you now, but I am pledged to complete a task." As I spoke, her eyes caressed my face. "One thing I promise you. From now on this island is my home. Even if only a fraction of it remains above the sea, I will always stay here and wait, because some day you may come back. I don't care how long I have to wait, so long as you will come."

Long before I had finished she was nodding her head. Then suddenly she crossed to my books, and taking the atlas, opened it on the table. The page was the one we had studied on the night of her first visit. She drew her

finger sharply away from the circle representing our earth, but instead of moving it the full distance of two feet, as on her previous demonstration, she travelled a little more than three inches. Then she drew her finger back to our earth again.

My heart pounded with excitement. "Do you mean that you are just travelling as far as there and returning to earth again?"

She nodded happily, her eyes shining through her unshed tears. She repeated the motion as before, only this time when she reached the earth again she pointed to me, and then moved her finger away, stopping again briefly at the outer position before continuing on to the spot she had previously indicated as the location of her world. Her diagrams were mere secondary assistances to the flow of thoughts which she passed into my mind. It was clear that the shorter journey was to effect a rendezvous with something else, either a bigger craft or perhaps a space station or a planet. From there she would return for me, and then both of us would proceed to her distant home.

I fetched the calendar and flicked the pages to the present month. "How long?" I asked her, hoping she had not forgotten the lesson I had given her on the calendar.

She thought a long time, her eyes fixed on the atlas, then ignoring the calendar, she pointed to the elliptical line of its path and followed it for half its complete distance, which measured exactly six months.

She studied my face anxiously while she questioned if I had understood.

"I'll be waiting for you," I assured her, "counting the minutes."

At the door I kissed her again and released her swiftly. I was vividly conscious of her misted eyes, and then she was gone, merging so swiftly with the darkness outside that it seemed she had literally vanished into thin air.

Oddly, the last glimpse I had of her was my gold signet-ring. A speck of gold in the darkness. It seemed a happy omen.

I never will be able to explain the absolute conviction I had that I would meet Lanadora again. It was a somewhat similar instinct which I had about Dan O'Leary, but much stronger. My loneliness and depression dropped from me. I was filled with a determined resolve to fight back against the storm that was threatening to destroy me. The water on the floor of the kitchen suddenly became a reproach to my indolence, the leaking ceiling a rebuke for my lack of vigilance. Deliberately I closed my mind to whatever might be happening to my friends outside as a falling drop of rainwater drew for a fraction of a second a silver line from the ceiling to the foot of Polly's bed. At once I moved the bed a foot or so towards the stove, finding great relief in practical action. I had scarcely finished when I became conscious of the same thin, high-pitched whine we had heard on the first night of Lanadora's arrival, only this time it grew more and more intense, creating an almost unbearable tingle in my ears. Then, quite suddenly, the black window of the kitchen became a fiery scarlet, so bright that I had the frightening impression of being in the centre of a raging cauldron of flame. Every object in the kitchen was touched with fire. The pale flame of the oil lamp disappeared as though it had been extinguished, and then the light from outside was gone, leaving me blinded and dazed.

Slowly my vision returned, and I beheld the drab yellow familiarity of the kitchen. Only a shadow of the flaming window was retained in the retina of my eyes. Then, behind me, Polly coughed once, and spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"So they left you alone, boy!" There was no censure in her voice.

I was neither shocked, startled, or frightened by her sudden return to consciousness. I took her wasted hand in mine.

"Not quite alone, Polly," I said. "I have you."

She smiled weakly and pressed my fingers.

"For a small while yet, with the help of God."

§ 13

POLLY died an hour later, as quietly as if she were sleeping. Her last spoken words remain with me yet :

"'Tis all a deep black mystery now, Davy, but one day it will be all clear. God's arms are big enough to embrace all the worlds—those we can see and those we can't. 'Tis hard, I know, to credit, but all the mysteries of this life are no problem at all to even the most stupid of the dead. . . ."

We had been talking of our departed friends, the vast distance that separated them from us, and the immeasurable magnitude of creation. I had told her all that happened while she was unconscious, although I believe that because of her strange clairvoyant powers it was unnecessary, except for details, and she pressed for even the smallest of these. She probed the depths of my own heart, too, and found its loneliness.

"Don't fret," she consoled me. "There is reason in everything, and the knowledge is on me that ye will meet your Lanadora again and find happiness." She chuckled suddenly. "Don't you believe that she is so far away, for the greatest distance a body can travel is only the length of God's thumb. Soon now I'll be shutting my own eyes on you, and in a second will be gone as far as anybody can go, and yet you'll be surprised how close I'll be to you in spite of that."

Of Katie Farrington's instructions to me to get a priest, Polly evidently thought a great deal. "'Tis she, with her

great heart, would think of it. But 'tis no time now to be looking for Father Daly—not that he wouldn't try to get here if he knew my need. Sure I'll take a chance with God, Davy. He was never too hard on a body."

When I told her of how the others had settled their affairs before they left, she made me prop her up in the bed.

"'Tis a very bad head I have for business, Davy. Anybody would think I was a poor woman. I have a bit of my fortune left, and I feel disposed now to leave it to a few creatures I have in mind." She closed her eyes for an instant, and I thought that the strain of talking was beginning to tell on her, but she recovered again. "There's a black bag beside the dresser there, Davy. Will you give it to me?"

I found a cloth bag tied with a running string, and brought it to her. From its depths she extracted a tight roll of notes. "There's over a hundred pounds here," she said, "and if you'll take a scrap of paper now and write down my Will I will try to sign it and make it nice and legal."

In spite of my protests she named me one of her beneficiaries for the sum of £50. An equal sum was bequeathed to Father Daly for Masses, and the remainder was divided among people on the mainland whom I did not know. When I had finished, Polly signed the penned document with difficulty, and I appended my own signature as witness.

"There!" said Polly, highly pleased with the whole business. "Only one more task I'll put on you, Davy. This island has been my real home and I don't want to be parted from it. As soon as the weather clears—as clear it will—I'd like you to lay my bones on the highest part of the island. There are many things I don't know about death, and if I have to wait for a long time the sound of the wind and the waves will be a comfort to me."

She died soon afterwards, a wonderful queenly woman, and I believe the storm was hushed somewhat by her passing.

Never afterwards did it regain its strength.

[David Cartwright's manuscript ended here, but a letter addressed to Cathal O'Riain was clipped to the last page.]

DEAR CATHAL,

To you alone I feel some explanation is due as to why I did not tell the truth about the disappearance of the islanders. After the storm, while I awaited your coming—for I knew you would be the first across—I tried to reason out what my best plan would be. I felt that to tell the truth would be stretching the credulity of even the most gullible, and even if by some miracle it was believed, it would, from my point of view, be most undesirable, for then the island would become a showpiece and there would be an end to my privacy. Not that I wished to become a recluse, but when Lanadora returned—and I was convinced she would, even then—I did not want her craft to alight on an island invaded by sightseers and tourists, or other hopefuls, scientific or otherwise. I had horrible visions of myself being nominated Ambassador Extraordinary of the world powers to establish contact with other planets. . . .

In short, I was, and still am, selfish enough to want to keep Lanadora to myself, and I did not want to invite a situation that would threaten our reunion.

As it was, I almost lost everything through the activities of our friend, Joxer McGrath. I am happy to be able to tell you now that I no longer have any reason to fear him, since in a very short time Lanadora and I will be leaving this island and the world.

I leave the manuscript of my formula for peace with you. It is not, I fear, a perfect solution to world problems, but I hope it is a faithful presentation of my father's idea. If it does not achieve its purpose there may be a single idea in its context from which the perfect plan may grow. In any case my father may at last rest in his grave, and my duty is done.

I am sure you will want me to give your kindest regards to Dan and Frankie and the others, and I will gladly do that for you. I have told Lanadora something of the great debt we both owe to you, and it is her wish that you accept a signet ring that was once mine and is now yours. It is unique in so far that it has travelled farther than anything you have ever known, and, of course, it may at times also serve to remind you of us.

Finally, as Polly says, we will not be far away, since the furthest we can go is but the length of God's thumb, for, surely, He holds us all in His hand.

. . . .

DAVID.

